

**IVAR**

Institute for Voluntary  
Action Research

**Supporting collaboration and  
partnerships in a changing context**

**A study for the Big Lottery Fund**

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**[enquiries@ivar.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ivar.org.uk) | [www.ivar.org.uk](http://www.ivar.org.uk)**

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## **Authorship**

This report has been written by Leila Baker and Ben Cairns. It is based on research carried out by the authors, together with Helen Garforth, Rebecca Moran and Saima Tarapdar.

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## Summary

This is a summary of key findings from a small-scale study commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund (BIG), which looked at collaboration and partnership working in a changing context. The study was carried out by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) between January and March 2011.

The aim of the study was to explore how BIG can support its voluntary and community sector (VCS) applicants and grant holders to collaborate more effectively and so deliver their agreed project outcomes more successfully in a changing environment.

Our inquiry was guided by the following questions:

- i. What is already known about the drivers, challenges and benefits of VCS collaboration and partnership?
- ii. Have the drivers, challenges and benefits of VCS collaboration altered since the recent wider changes that we have seen in the VCS operating environment?
- iii. Which of these changes are relevant to BIG's grant making? What are the implications of these changes for BIG's practice?

Our findings are a synthesis of more than 30 semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders and 90 survey responses from BIG staff. The fieldwork was based on the key learning from a desk review of collaborative working also carried out for BIG as part of this study.

The research took place during a period of flux in the policy and economic context in which both the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and their funders operate. It would be helpful, therefore, to revisit the questions we address in this study at a later date.

## Key findings

### Challenges

- Pressure is growing in the VCS to enter into formal collaborative working arrangements, but the time and resources available to VCS organisations to consider whether and how to collaborate has diminished
- VCS interest in peer learning is growing, but the sector's capacity to engage with this and other kinds of learning is dwindling due to a lack of time and resources

- Knowledge among VCS organisations about different kinds of collaborative working arrangements remains uneven. Consortium and merger have a higher profile than group structure<sup>1</sup> or shared back office arrangements, for example
- Consortium formation has been promoted as a way for VCS organisations to become 'commission ready'. This kind of collaboration requires significant investment of time and resources for an uncertain return
- Quick decisions about whether to collaborate or merge could lead to mission drift or embroil organisations in difficult partnerships due to differences in values and ethos
- VCS infrastructure support is being dismantled and there is a risk to funders and funded organisations that expertise in collaborative working will be dispersed or lost
- Organisations want bespoke practical support, but funders may only be able to find resources for generic tools and guidance plus peer learning events.

## Responses

- BIG and other funders can address some of these problems by enabling organisations to think first about what they want to achieve through collaborating, before deciding what form collaborative working arrangements should take
- Where bespoke support cannot be provided, funders can ensure that their procedures allow organisations the time they need to identify the most appropriate collaborative working arrangements. Their guidance can emphasise good processes for thinking about the function followed by the form of collaborative working
- Guidance about formal partnerships needs to be widened to cover group structure and shared back office functions, as well as consortium formation and merger
- Funders need to find ways to make the best use of their internal communications and online technologies to facilitate peer learning among grant holders.

## Areas for future knowledge exchange and research

- Opportunities for exchanging ideas about collaboration between Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that work in international development and those NGOs or voluntary and community sector organisations with a domestic or

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<sup>1</sup> Group structure is a form of merger whereby organisations have an individual identity, but are part of a legally constituted group. Group members are often owned by a parent company, which may have more or less control over the activities of individual members.

UK focus appear to be underused currently. One area where interviewees thought that an exchange of ideas might be beneficial was the challenges that arise when consortia are formed rapidly; this can arise in disaster relief campaigns

- Information about drivers, benefits and challenges of collaboration between the VCS and private sector is patchy and uneven
- New approaches to supporting organisations to prepare, and manage, collaborative working need to be developed. These would use peer learning; online technologies; and targeted and bespoke support.

## **Part One: Introduction**

This is a research report about collaboration and partnership working in the voluntary and community sector. The research has been carried out during a time of huge upheaval and uncertainty for both funders and the organisations that they support. Given this, the questions we address here will benefit from being revisited at a later date.

### **1.1 Aims and desired outcomes of the study**

The aim of the research was to explore how the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) can support its voluntary and community sector (VCS) applicants and grant holders to collaborate more effectively and so deliver their agreed project outcomes more successfully in a changing environment.

BIG hoped that the study would: *“inform the way that [it] develops programmes and processes, most notably where we require partnerships as part of the eligibility criteria. It should also help us to identify specific areas for further support to applicants and grant holders, including through the production and revision of existing resources and the promotion of good practice”* (BIG, 2010).

The research was carried out between January and March 2011.

### **1.2 Approach**

Three questions were identified to guide the inquiry stage of the study:

- i. What is already known about the drivers, challenges and benefits of VCS collaboration and partnership?
- ii. Have the drivers, challenges and benefits of VCS collaboration altered since the recent wider changes that we have seen in the VCS operating environment?
- iii. Which of these changes are relevant to BIG’s grant making? What are the implications of these changes for BIG’s practice?

**During the study, our participants posed a fourth question:**

- iv. What are the main drivers, challenges and benefits for BIG of encouraging and/or facilitating collaboration?

### **1.3 Methods**

The findings presented in the report are a synthesis of information drawn from more than 30 semi-structured interviews and 90 survey responses, including:

- i. Interviews with nine of BIG’s senior staff in the four nations and the UK

The purpose of these interviews was to gather views about changes in the drivers and challenges of collaborative working and what these mean for policy and practice within BIG.

Interviewees were all involved in BIG's strategic direction, policy engagement or international funding.

ii. Interviews with seven key informants working across the four nations and the UK

The purpose of these interviews was also to identify changes in the drivers and challenges of collaborative working, to identify differences between the UK nations and to reflect on the implications for BIG.

Interviewees worked in national VCS infrastructure organisations, academic institutions or were practitioners with extensive experience of facilitating collaboration.

iii. Interviews with 16 VCS organisations including BIG grant holders

In these interviews we asked about current organisational pressures, how these relate to collaborative working and strategies for overcoming the challenges of collaboration. Interviewees were drawn from a range of VCS organisations and included BIG grant holders.

iv. Online survey of BIG grants staff, which elicited 96 responses (25 per cent response rate)

The purpose of the survey was to collate observations about collaboration and partnership among BIG's applicants and grant holders.

The survey was sent to grants staff including Grants Officers, Assistant Grants Officers and Programme Managers. Of those 375 members of staff, one quarter responded. Two thirds of respondents were Grants Officers, the remainder were Programme Managers or Assistant Grants Officers; three quarters were in England with 12, 10 and four participants in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales respectively.

## 1.4 Presentation of findings

Given that this is a qualitative study, we do not attribute numbers to those holding any particular point of view, although we do highlight points made by several interviewees. We are presenting the findings anonymously; we refer to ideas as being put forward by 'participants', although where we wish to distinguish the views of BIG staff or participants in a particular UK nation, this is indicated. Unattributed quotations are presented throughout this draft report in italics. Where appropriate, we provide specific examples of 'lessons from the field'.

We use 'collaboration' as a generic term meaning *all* non-competitive interactions across the boundaries of two or more organisations. This may include: temporary cooperation, strategic alliances, bidding consortia, take-overs and mergers; partnerships between the VCS and public or business sectors.



BIG's existing guidance, *'Working in partnership: A sourcebook'*, states: "*Partnerships can range from informal information sharing and consultation networks to formal partnerships with their own partnership agreement*" (SQW Ltd, 2002). Therefore, in this report, we use the terms collaboration and partnership interchangeably. However, we note that, in other literature, a distinction is made between the two terms, with collaboration being used as a generic term to encompass any form of interaction; and partnership being used to refer to formalised collaborative arrangements.

## Part Two: Context

### 2.1 Policy context

Many voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) in the UK are currently experiencing an unprecedented demand for their services, as cuts to public sector services begin to be implemented. At the same time, governmental funding for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations is either being reduced or withdrawn. Despite this, the current policy agenda around the idea of the 'Big Society' envisages an enhanced role for the VCS in public life: providing services, reviving communities, and contributing to wellbeing. The idea of collaboration is central to this agenda.

Collaborative working, in all its different guises, has become a central feature of organisational life in the VCS. A common thread running through public policy for the VCS, since the publication of the Treasury's 2002 Cross Cutting Review (HM Treasury, 2002), has been the idea of collaborative working between VCOs as a means of achieving greater efficiency, effectiveness and impact. The 2009 plan to help VCOs to withstand the effects of the economic recession included a Modernisation Fund, for example, that targeted organisations wanting to merge or collaborate (Cabinet Office, 2009). In Scotland, the government's Third Sector Enterprise aimed to help VCS organisations grow and develop in different ways including partnership working. Most recently, the Coalition Government's programme and its commitment to the 'Big Society' indicate that policy interest in the VCS remains high and that the emphasis on collaboration continues to be strong (Cabinet Office, 2010a; Cabinet Office, 2010b).

### 2.2 BIG: current practice, future issues

BIG has witnessed the benefits of collaboration and partnership working via a number of its programmes or those it has delivered for others. Collaboration, including cross-sector partnership, is a prominent feature of the projects funded under BIG's Well-Being programme, for example (CLES, 2011). In addition, 'Supportive and engaged partnerships', were identified as a key success factor in the Community Assets programme delivered for the Office for Civil Society (Rocket Science UK Ltd, 2009). A paper comparing VCS and statutory organisations as lead grant holders argued that wide stakeholder involvement can ensure a better and more appropriate response to need (Browning, 2009). The benefits of cross-sector partnerships have also been highlighted: "...the statutory sector can mobilise a wide range of resources...It can more readily have a strategic influence...The VCS can be more responsive to and articulate beneficiary need" (Browning, 2009).

A commitment to strengthening organisations is intrinsic to BIG's strategic aim to become an 'intelligent funder'. Although supporting collaboration and partnership working in particular is included within the intelligent funder framework - "*We will...help applicants and recipients to work with others where there is clear benefit*" (BIG, 2009a) - BIG draws a distinction between *encouraging* and *forcing* collaboration: "*We will not force partnerships, but we will encourage links to be made between organisations who are working to deliver the same ends*" (BIG, 2009b).

This form of support to grant holders is provided in the context of policy directions in the UK and England that ask BIG to focus their funding on people and communities that benefit from the VCS but also in a climate where BIG is continuing to manage its operating costs to deliver value for lottery money.

The online survey of BIG staff involved in grant making provided further background about BIG's current approaches to collaborative working. (The survey findings are also included in Part Three of this report.)

### **Key points from an online survey of BIG staff directly involved in grant making**

Grants officers said that *informal* kinds of collaboration, such as networks and peer learning activities, are more common among the grant holders that they work with than *formalised* arrangements, such as consortia and/or sharing of back office functions. The scale of these collaborative arrangements varies, but a high proportion are large, with four or more organisations involved.

Survey participants identified three major types of BIG intervention to promote collaboration and partnerships between applicants and grant holders:

- *High engagement*: this is either planned (eg visits with Village SOS projects) or unplanned (eg programmes where problems arise between partner organisations): “We got drawn into a few [partnerships], not as far as mediating, but gently helping the partnerships along. Quite hard to do [while] retain[ing] a ‘funder relationship’”
- *Peer networking and linking*: this generally takes place face to face (eg hosting peer support events to encourage development of networks under the Young People’s Fund grants) and online (eg online community being trialled as part of Village SOS). Awards for All was mentioned by participants as a positive example of BIG: “*joining up peer learning*”
- *Programme-driven collaboration*: this involves encouraging links between the VCS, public and business sectors with the expectation that the VCS will learn from the management and administrative processes used in the other sectors. One study participant commented that: “They [VCS grant holder] had a better understanding of how the other side worked, developed their own capacity building and are now in a better position for commissioning”.

## **Part Three: Findings from this study**

Our findings are presented under three main headings. We begin by presenting a brief summary of earlier research before setting out key findings from the survey and interviews carried out for this study.

### **3.1 Contemporary collaboration: drivers**

#### **3.1.1 Earlier research**

There are numerous, and often inter-related, factors that lead VCOs to consider working in collaboration. Some organisations are motivated to collaborate in response to the challenges facing them either as a result of the changing policy environment, increased financial vulnerability or insufficient organisational capacity (in terms of governance, staffing or infrastructure) (IVAR, 2010a). An increasingly competitive external environment has, in some cases, made it difficult to justify the existence of two organisations working in the same field (ibid). Research has also found that a feeling of isolation within a rural setting was among the reasons why some support providers have considered merger (Capacitybuilders, 2010).

Other VCOs may consider collaboration as a proactive way of developing their organisation, either in terms of providing more comprehensive and higher-quality services, having more voice and influence on the policies of governmental authorities and funders, or capitalising on the opportunity to learn from the experience of other organisations (IVAR, 2010a; Sally Downs Consulting et al, 2009).

Other organisations that might benefit from collaborative working may find it difficult to achieve in practice. The Charity Commission found, for example, that: “...*there are certain challenges that small charities face that make collaboration particularly pertinent to them*”, including greater exposure to external pressures, lower levels of paying members (which can constrain their activities) and relying on only a handful of committed staff and/or volunteers (Charity Commission, 2010).

#### **3.1.2 Key findings**

There was general agreement that financial pressures and some coordination failure or duplication of work has led organisations to consider collaboration and merger. Participants in Northern Ireland described how these drivers, which are common to all the UK nations, were made worse by the withdrawal of European funding and the government’s relative inexperience in resourcing or coordinating the VCS and its infrastructure.

Participants perceived a growing interest in collaboration that is driven by financial and policy interests, although uncertainty remains about the scale and outcomes of this kind of joint working. Specifically, organisations may be driven to collaborate by a desire to acquire resources and/or to partner with others who have different expertise in the hope of winning contracts or grants.

### Lessons from the field

A group of youth work practitioners in Scotland have chosen to collaborate rather than compete for resources in response to recent cuts in their funding. Through action learning and other collective processes, they have formed a partnership. Their aim is to collectively negotiate the “*minimum best*” future youth service based on available resources and the needs and wants of the young people they work with. They hope to achieve this through a combination of action learning processes, capacity building and youth engagement. This example demonstrates that practitioners can resist the pressure to compete with one another and instead continue to put their service users first.

Open competition for public sector commissioned work was seen as having two, contradictory effects: on the one hand, creating an impetus for the VCS to work with private sector organisations (although there was little actual evidence of this) and, on the other hand, pushing VCS organisations to consider collaboration as a means to strengthen their ability to compete with the private sector in a crowded market.

Although our study identified drivers for working with the private sector, we found very few examples of the experience in terms of challenges or outcomes and benefits. Participants identified isolated examples of cross-sector working between the VCS and private sector, but said that they did not know whether these were typical. Compared with partnerships between the VCS and public sector, relatively little has been written about collaboration between the VCS and the private sector. Participants perceived partnership with the public sector as a strategic objective, whereas partnership with the private sector was occasional and ad hoc.

### Lessons from the field

In the field of international development, cross-sector partnerships between the VCS and private sectors have occurred where civil society organisations have worked alongside private companies that administer government aid. Some of these cross-sector partnership arrangements have worked well. But participants in this study said that there is widespread concern about private companies managing development funds: “*Profit led companies doing this work without a strong understanding of social development work or civil society is not seen as best practice*”. Based on this, study participants suggested that collaboration between the private and voluntary sectors needs to take into account differences in organisational culture, ethos and values and tackle any difficulties that may arise from this.

Participants linked their views about drivers to four specific types of collaboration:

- i. There is a growing interest in more *informal collaboration* (such as networking, information sharing or other kinds of peer learning) as a means towards self-help in the VCS. In part, this is being driven by a need to become less reliant on national infrastructure support organisations. However, the sector’s dwindling

capacity (in time and personnel) to participate in this kind of collaboration was also noted.

- ii. Sharing back office functions was thought to be growing in popularity among organisations working in the field of international development and in the wider VCS, partly because it is perceived as internally driven rather than 'forced'. Some study participants in Scotland compared this form of collaboration with consortium formation, which they described as externally driven by competition for scarce resources.
- iii. There were mixed views about the formation of consortia. Some participants described it as a positive or proactive move to strengthen VCS organisations and meet their aims; others saw it as being a negative move to avoid merger, and having uncertain benefits. Nevertheless, participants said it was growing in prominence.
- iv. We found that our study participants were aware of some high profile mergers, such as Age UK or mergers of several councils for voluntary service (CVS), but were unsure whether merger had permeated the VCS in other ways. A number of participants described "*forced mergers*" and said that these had created anger and resentment among VCS organisations (eg Scottish Rape Crisis Centres); they did not want BIG to be implicated in either "*forced merger*" or wider patterns of "*forced collaboration*". Scottish and international participants said that there was growing interest in group structure as an alternative to merger. Group structure is a form of merger whereby organisations have an individual identity, but are part of a legally constituted group. Group members are often owned by a parent company, which may have more or less control over the activities of individual members. Study participants thought that group structure was gaining support, because it allows participating organisations to retain their independent identity. However, group structure was also perceived as having its own challenges: "*How do you find a group structure that is highly tolerant of difference? You need a core ideology [across the group]*".

## 3.2 Contemporary collaboration: challenges

### 3.2.1 Earlier research

IVAR's 2010 synthesis of ten years' research into collaboration highlighted a number of challenges of collaborative working including:

- Dealing with difference
- Protecting organisational identity and niche
- Balancing individual and collective interests
- Developing appropriate leadership and appropriate governance structures
- Securing resources and organisational capacity for collaboration
- Developing a shared understanding of the purpose of the collaboration (IVAR, 2010a).

Some organisations may be more likely to experience one or more of these challenges. It has been found, for example, that smaller charities are less likely to collaborate (Charity Commission, 2010). This is due to either a lack of funding for the collaborative venture, lack of human capacity (ibid) or because other organisations may find it hard to work with smaller organisations: “...*finding ways to work with similar, less well resourced groups*” can be difficult (SQW Ltd, 2002). Partnership fatigue can be a problem for those organisations that find themselves involved in numerous, overlapping partnerships (Capacitybuilders, 2010). Previous studies, including work commissioned by BIG, has also uncovered a perceived lack of time and resources for developing and managing collaboration (ETTO, 2010).

### **3.2.2 Key findings**

Participants described the complexities and difficulties that arise in collaborative working and highlighted three key concerns:

#### **i. Leadership and governance**

Three issues relating to leadership and governance were identified. First, the capacity of trustees to engage with partnerships, especially where their organisation is involved in several. Second, the ability of VCS organisations to lead collaboration, because of the financial and management challenges involved. Third, a perception that, even where organisations have robust leadership and governance arrangements, other organisations (especially in the public or private sector) may not have confidence in, or recognise, their authority.

Our study participants told us that people working in the international sector are much more comfortable using the term ‘power’ than those working domestically. They are more aware of power dynamics and are prepared to: “*put it out on the table*”. This makes it easier to discuss issues of authority in partnerships. However, they still: “*struggle to deal with it*”.

#### **ii. VCS mission and values**

VCS organisations face a tension between survival and organisational mission. Survival requires quick action, including collaboration, to secure solutions, which may be only short term; whereas, mission demands that they focus on the long term future of their organisation and the needs of their beneficiaries. Participants in the VCS talked about making a conscious decision internally to resist mission drift and not to attempt to survive at any cost.

Although organisations that work with marginalised groups and whose funding has come under particular pressure may face tough decisions, it was suggested that it was important for organisations to be “*grown up*” about what they can offer and what other organisations may be able to do better than them. For example, one participant stated that: “*The need to survive might propel people into useful collaborations, similarly it may produce ill-matched relationships*”; another participant commented: “*So many organisations are having their funding cut, the collaboration may not be for good reasons*”. Participants suggested that there may be lessons from international

organisations engaged in disaster relief partnerships where quick decisions are often made possible by the strength of individual organisations' mission and values.

It was also stressed that collaboration with organisations that have very different mission, ethos and values could negatively affect staff: *"the rivalries and mutual distrust still exist"*; or, as another participant put it: *"what seems to emerge is the social value of organisations. The threat of not working in the way that they should be doing can give rise to anger, shock and disbelief"*.

### **iii. Thinking about collaboration**

We found that organisations currently struggle to make time to think about collaboration and how best to go about it. Possibly as a result of this, particular partnership models emerge and get taken up: *"the perception that merger leads to efficiency and survival is becoming dominant"*.

Participants said that VCS organisations could resist this by being more proactive and strategic in their efforts to become *"collaboration and commission ready"*, for example by seeking new partners. This careful and considered approach to collaboration was thought to be highly desirable in this time of almost unprecedented pressure and demand on frontline organisations. However, these same pressures and demands make this very difficult to achieve.

Uncertainty about funding and commissioning opportunities, together with anxiety about survival, make any kind of long-term planning almost impossible. This has potentially serious implications, as one participant observed:

*"This period might generate new ways of collaborating, or it might make organisations more inward-looking and competitive. This is one of the potential contradictions in the Big Society: there is distaste for over-blown partnerships and top-down planning and a genuine belief that competition will add value: this could be very dangerous for a purer view of collaborative working"*.

The challenges of collaborative working were said to be further intensified by three factors. First, VCS organisations are being asked to participate (in some cases for the first time) in a market place which, instead of being stable, is changing and becoming more crowded, largely because of increased competition with the private sector and reduced public expenditure. Second, VCS organisations talked about *"a disappearing infrastructure of collaboration support"*. The concern is that this will expose a lack of understanding among funders about how collaboration looks and works in the VCS. Third, participants described how collaboration in general and consortium formation in particular, require significant investment for uncertain outcomes and benefits: *"it all takes time to see if it can work"*.



### 3.3 Helping collaboration work: conditions and interventions

#### 3.3.1 Earlier research

Organisations have found ways to respond to general collaboration and partnership challenges in the past by:

- Actively managing the collaboration: this may include setting aside time for relationship building, involving the right people and treating collaboration as a process rather than a one-off event
- Ensuring that there is regular, open and honest communication
- Dealing sensitively with, and addressing, the emotional burden of collaboration
- Developing a shared vision amongst all partners
- Having someone to 'champion' and provide enthusiasm for the collaboration (Capacitybuilders, 2010; IVAR, 2010a; SQW Ltd, 2002).

The Charity Commission (2010) found that there is an appetite amongst both collaborating and non-collaborating organisations for more support, including information, advice and guidance as well as funding. In their study on equalities-based infrastructure support for the VCS, ETTO suggested that funders should consider investing time and resources not only in supporting collaborative working among grant holders, but also in helping grants staff understand what effective partnership working looks like (ETTO, 2010).

Collaboration Benefits, one of nine national support services funded by Capacitybuilders, has recently provided a number of lessons about supporting collaboration in practice. In some instances programme staff helped individual organisations to become more 'internally robust' and to develop their skills and capacity to collaborate (IVAR, 2010b). In other cases, the programme worked with a group of collaborating organisations with a focus on the facilitation of relationships, development of appropriate collaborative arrangements and brokering links between the collaborative ventures and their external environment (ibid).

A wide range of skills and attributes were found to be required by the collaboration support staff: "...it's an interesting box set of skills. It's not strategy. It's not consultancy. It's not facilitation. It's not conflict resolution. It's all of those..." (ibid). In summary, it was found that collaboration support needs to be: "*calibrated to the particular knowledge, capacity and circumstances of each group of organisations*" (ibid). Some technical support is also required, for example knowledge about due diligence processes, how to draw up formal partnership agreements and joint contracting.

#### 3.3.2 Key findings: Conditions

Participants highlighted five conditions for successful collaboration. Although they did not see BIG as necessarily responsible for creating these conditions, there are implications for BIG in terms of how it may help to shape and support this kind of enabling environment.

The conditions were:

i. ***Strategic thinking***

Participants said that funders can create a culture in which organisations are encouraged to think strategically about the reasons why they have chosen to collaborate and to be honest about the potential pitfalls of working in this way. By setting aside time to think about the purpose of collaboration, as well as desired benefits and potential obstacles, organisations can become better prepared and better positioned to manage any difficulties that might arise.

ii. ***Being fit for purpose***

Organisations need to develop knowledge of different kinds of collaborative arrangements so that they can select a model that is 'fit for purpose' (in other words that will enable partners to achieve their collective aims) and for the culture and ethos of the organisations involved.

**Lessons from the field**

Some partnerships develop out of a mutual interest in a problem rather than a desire to undertake a joint initiative. These partnerships help improve organisations' understanding of one another's culture, values and differences; this, in turn, will help them work together in the future should they choose to do so. For example, the UK's Department for International Development is leading on support for issue-based coalitions of people in a specific context. Key individuals and organisations are brought together, not so much to resolve the issue that unites them, but rather to build trust across sectors, change ways of working and tackle corruption. One participant illustrated this theme with examples from the Gulf, Oman and Saudi Arabia, all described as "*low trust environments*".

iii. ***Investment***

Participants described how collaborative working takes time to develop and manage: "*We need to provide a space to get the collaboration started. It's very difficult to do and partnerships take a long time to forge*". With this in mind, they said, funders need to be flexible and patient, in particular allowing a lead in time for the early stages of collaboration. A commitment to full cost recovery can help grant holding organisations to budget for the staff time associated with the development and management of collaboration, as well as for continuous learning over the lifetime of a partnership. Full cost recovery was thought to be especially important in the context of VCS led collaboration.

BIG offers full cost recovery to grant holders but makes a distinction between *development* and *management* of collaboration in this respect. Development costs may be recovered by organisations that apply for funding from programmes where there are several steps in the application process ('multi-stage') and development funding is offered.

On the other hand, because BIG does not fund retrospective costs, this facility is not open to organisations applying for funding under programmes where there is only one 'stage' in the application process followed by awards. Here, BIG acknowledges that applicants are taking a 'risk' when they put time and resources into developing collaborative arrangements in order to submit a funding application which may not be successful. This outlay of time and resources for an uncertain return may become a more significant issue if VCS organisations (thought to be less able to bear risk than the public sector) become the most common lead organisation in partnerships funded by BIG.

This has two implications. First, if BIG wants to promote or indeed to require collaboration in its strategic programmes, it should ensure that development funding and adequate time are available in the first round to ensure proper development of collaborations or partnerships. Second, applicants to other programmes need to understand that they will have to have developed adequate partnership arrangements **before** applying. BIG will assess applications in competition; part of this process involves an analysis of risk, and less robust arrangements are logically more likely to lead to an application being rejected.

The findings of this study suggest that two questions may be worth exploring:

- Are all applicants budgeting for the full costs of managing collaboration?
- Are all applicants and grant holding organisations aware that BIG offers full cost recovery in this context?

iv. **Communication**

Partnerships need to communicate with other networks and organisations in order to make a difference to their target beneficiaries. By publicising their partnerships in the VCS and public sectors, participants said that they could generate wider support and buy-in.

**Lessons from the field**

A consortium of welfare advice organisations was keen to develop their relationships with local public sector organisations. They hoped that this would strengthen their position locally and boost their chances of winning contracts in the future. The consortium decided on a practical approach that would demonstrate their skills, knowledge and experience to their VCS and public sector colleagues. The consortium offered to give talks about new legislation and regulation to other VCS and public sector colleagues. They used these occasions to publicise the consortium and explain its aims and purpose. Participants said that this resulted in the consortium forming new links with the public sector.

v. **People**

Organisations need to accept that: “[collaboration often] *boils down to the individuals*” and that problems associated with this are difficult but commonplace. It was suggested that explicit acknowledgement of the “*people issues*” might usefully be built into the development and management of collaborative initiatives. Participants focused on the problems that arise when individuals move on, not only because of the loss of knowledge or expertise but also because of the need to form new relationships with the individual’s successor.

**3.3.3 Key findings: Interventions to support collaboration**

Participants stressed that organisations currently need practical support and mentoring, not more guidelines or tools. This support could usefully focus on four aspects of collaborative working:

- assistance with thinking about, and understanding, the potential benefits and processes of collaborative working
- the need for help with understanding the significance of difference (in mission, culture and ethos) to the success or challenges of collaboration
- support with preparing to collaborate, including attracting partners and identifying contacts or networks (to create new links with other VCS, public and private sector organisations for the purposes of partnership formation and to communicate their aims and activities)
- help with the day-to-day management of collaboration, including monitoring progress and sustaining benefits.

**Lessons from the field**

In BIG’s AdvantAge programme (for older people in Wales), partnerships were a prominent feature even though they were not a formal requirement. BIG held briefing events where potential applicants could network and identify partners before making a funding application. This was perceived as mutually beneficial: the organisations found partners and BIG could process a single application rather than multiple applications for similar initiatives.

Specific practical suggestions from participants about support for collaboration included:

- i. Advice, information and mentoring about:
- the function that different forms of collaborative arrangements may serve and the time and tasks involved in their development
  - the function that different forms of legal partnership agreements may serve
  - managing finances in the context of cross-sector collaboration
  - the realistic costs of developing, managing and learning from collaboration.

There was widespread interest in exploring how new media opportunities could be used for delivering these forms of bespoke support. Participants talked about the usefulness

of “*direct surgeries*” that use Skype or other forms of new media to deliver bespoke advice and support to remote organisations that lack local infrastructure support.

- ii. Showcasing events for successful projects with ‘meet and greet’ opportunities for applicants and grant holders at an early stage. Parallel ‘online’ events could open this up to wider audiences by streaming videos of showcased projects and keynote speeches.
- iii. Building direct support contracts into funding and programmes for collaboration and partnerships.
- iv. Spotting when applicants or grant holders have common interests or challenges and might benefit from being in touch with one another; brokering initial contacts. Rather than seeing this as a one-off intervention, this was described as a continuous process. Within BIG, it might require a slight shift in internal communications to ensure that knowledge and insights are available and shared.

#### **Lessons from the field**

Two Portuguese speaking organisations, one in Mozambique and one in Latin America, were running similar community interventions. The organisations were able to share practical ideas, learn from each other and make improvements to their own projects. The collaboration was just an exchange of ideas and required no further input from BIG International than to introduce them.

#### **Lessons from the field**

Participants said that BIG already has a strong track record in encouraging and requiring networking and peer learning as part of a grants programme. In the Young People’s Fund programme for example, one BIG participant stated: “*We encourage peer support networks nationally and locally through hosting peer support events to share good practices and help them be more self sustaining*”.

- v. Commissioning and disseminating further learning about specific models of collaborative working including group structure and sharing back office functions. Participants thought that this needed to include information about the first steps required in developing each of these collaborative working arrangements.
- vi. Working alongside applicants and grant holders to assess their skills for collaboration development and management and then procuring or providing appropriate support.

### 3.4 BIG's role in supporting collaborative working

Building on these practical suggestions, participants identified three distinct, but related areas for BIG to address in relation to their support for collaborative working: leadership, changes to BIG's systems and direct services. Each of these is addressed below.

#### 3.4.1 Leadership

Participants said that BIG is in a position of privilege: unlike other organisations forced to make quick decisions, BIG can take the time to learn, reflect and be flexible about the way it works. Therefore, they said, BIG had a duty to work hard to get collaboration support right. For example, one BIG staff member reflected: *"Overall, it's a risk worth taking and if we can't take a few risks I don't think anyone can. We've got that opportunity"*.

This leadership role was seen as comprising three core elements:

- distilling and disseminating BIG's own learning about collaboration, including learning from the four nations and international work
- designing future programmes in collaboration with key experts or organisations to model collaboration in practice
- engaging in peer learning initiatives with other funders around common issues or challenges (for example, impact assessment).

#### Lessons from the field

We came across many peer learning models that may offer opportunities for BIG. One example is a Comic Relief project in Malawi which involves several funder organisations, including the Elton John AIDS Foundation, each of which has a distinctive brand and identity. Our study participants thought that this example would be useful for learning about how you bring together high profile organisations (with strong brands that they want to protect) to tackle a difficult problem.

If BIG continues to encourage and facilitate collaboration, this work will need to be underpinned by clearly communicated aims, rationale, desired change and expectations. The following questions from our participants can inform these considerations:

- What is BIG's primary aim and rationale for collaboration? Participants said that, rather than being used as a demand management tool, it needs to be rooted in its commitment to bring about sustained change for beneficiaries and for entrenched social issues: *"there is also a more noble element, that is co-production, about BIG and organisations thinking about how and when collaboration can benefit the beneficiary"*
- What is BIG's primary aim and rationale for grant making? Is it about supporting organisations, about creating change 'on the ground' or about changing policy and practice through supporting new interventions? BIG's current mission is 'to

bring real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need'. The quotes below illustrate the kinds of questions that participants asked:

*“For BIG there is a debate about whether our focus is on the VCS as a whole, or is it on some long-standing social issues, the affected beneficiaries, and therefore some specific sub-sectoral groupings?”*

*“Funders [need] to think about grant making as a means to achieve change in a given context and not as a means to support a particular organisation”*

- When designing a new programme, BIG might ask: *“Would the beneficiary group benefit from collaboration? If organisations don’t collaborate will their beneficiaries suffer from a lack of joined up work?”*
- BIG may have a secondary aim and rationale for collaboration which relates to a *“benign influence”* over the sector, challenging organisations that work in silos, for example: *“collaborations should be supported and not forced, but they should be encouraged not to work in silos and help the sector be more thematic and share learning across”*
- If it is accepted that the primary aim and rationale should be about change, then BIG may also want to consider: *“how can we assess the difference we make when we support collaboration?”*

### 3.4.2 Changes to BIG’s systems and processes

Whilst participants expressed a preference for *bespoke* practical support for collaboration, it was noted that, as a large organisation, BIG needs systems and consistency. As one BIG participant remarked: *“We should of course aspire to offer something more nuanced about supporting the health of a partnership, but BIG is built like a factory not a boutique”*. Therefore, some of the practical support that VCS organisations require needs to be embedded in BIG’s systems or procedures.

Participants identified four specific issues which may require changes to BIG’s grant making processes (some of these overlap with suggestions set out in 3.3.3 above):

i. **Programme design** that facilitates development, management and learning from collaboration through providing time for discussions and set-up as well as offering to fund this as part of any development funding in multiple stage application processes: *“Invest in set up. Setting firm ground is the key thing”*. Participants also suggested that BIG could encourage grant holders to think about setting budget headings for ongoing learning and reflection (which might be part of self-evaluation) about the process of collaborative working where this is a major feature of their delivery plan.

In particular, participants thought that a challenge for BIG may lie in the tension between, on the one hand, encouraging creative solutions to social problems (a learning and experimental approach) and, on the other hand, the need for tight systems and clear lines of accountability (to meet accountability and governance requirements). This is illustrated in the example below.

### Lessons from the field

A participant in a BIG programme that features partnership working, was impressed by the way BIG encouraged the partners to be creative and try out new ways of working: *“in this economic climate, voluntary organisations can show how to do things differently. BIG gave us the space to lab test different ways of doing things”*. As the programme progressed, however, partners found that BIG’s requirements undermined the creative potential of the programme, placing constraints on individual partners and making them less inclined to experiment and take risks: *“organisations tend to be risk averse; it’s hard to do things differently because of all the scrutiny”*. For example, this participant felt that the partner organisations were expected to formalise governance and finance arrangements before the purpose of the collaboration was fully developed and, therefore, before the partners could identify the most appropriate collaborative working arrangements. In addition, the complicated system of contracts between BIG and each partner was perceived as being inconsistent with the dynamic and creative nature of the partnership itself. Based on this example, BIG may want to explore alternative ways to manage relationships with partners and assess their work, for example through peer review.

ii. **Assessing applicants’ collaborative arrangements** to see if they are fit for their own purpose (as well as BIG’s requirements) and whether they allow enough time for managing the collaboration.

With regard to the current emphasis on partnership agreements, participants thought that this may enable BIG to manage the volume of applications it receives by reducing the number of separate applications (only the lead agency applies) and by weeding out organisations that do not have agreements in place.

Whilst BIG does not offer standard model partnership agreements - *“to avoid imposing a specific model on everybody”* - this lack of guidance might create a barrier for potential VCS lead organisations with less experience of formal partnership working.

Several participants commented on the benefits of BIG’s ‘portfolio model of partnerships’. Portfolios have a lead organisation and are made up of a number of individual projects, usually delivered at a number of locations, which together form a cohesive plan to deliver the programme outcomes. Participants argued that this model is cheaper and more manageable for BIG than other models: *“[it] costs significantly less than working with all organisations”*. It also had the advantage of requiring organisations to look right across a locality or a community of interest and apply for funding with others.

Participants in BIG argued that lead agency models have the potential to strengthen the accountable organisation, as well as transfer skills and knowledge (including about collaboration management) to other partner organisations. Other participants, however, felt that lead agency partnership models can deepen inequalities, because they continue to *“strengthen the strong organisations”*.



iii. ***Finding ways to build links between BIG and other members of a collaboration*** besides the lead organisation. Participants felt that this would be a constructive way to tackle the problems that arise when the other partners in a collaboration do not take shared responsibility for the funding application or for the long term development and management of the collaboration. However, it should be noted that such an approach could become resource intensive for BIG and might raise further questions about interference.

vi. ***Rethinking 'risk' and the management of risk*** in the context of VCS organisations leading collaborative working. BIG's staff perceived a risk in VCS led collaboration: desired outcomes might not be achieved because of potential governance, management and capacity problems. For them, risk management was about tackling these potential shortcomings in VCS organisations. Other participants in this study, however, focused on risk and the management of risk when collaborating organisations (in any sector) lack clear and shared understanding of their aims and a collaborative arrangement that is 'fit for purpose'.

In order to achieve this, study participants suggested that VCS organisations need to be proactive about getting ready to collaborate. Some thought that funders like BIG could help with this either directly or by allowing organisations sufficient 'start-up time'. Such an approach might include:

- Supporting trustees to understand their role in partnerships formed by their organisation
- Diagnosing organisational support needs specific to collaborative working when collaboration is first considered
- Developing quality assurance processes similar to those in the public and private sector to cover the organisation's work; this would make the organisation a more robust and reliable lead partner or participant in collaboration
- Developing strong leadership and strategic learning capacity to enable the lead organisation to think about its long term goals, develop appropriate collaborative arrangements and oversee their implementation.

### **3.4.3 Direct services**

Participants were clear that VCS applicants and grant holders need direct, bespoke, practical support to respond to the contemporary drivers, and overcome the challenges, of collaboration. Such support is required throughout the lifetime of a collaboration. In addition to the suggestion outlined above, participants thought that BIG could:

- Engage all programme, regional, policy and outreach staff in spotting opportunities for facilitated peer learning between applicants and grant holders about the challenges they face and the goals they want to pursue
- Invest in developing and testing new media approaches to delivering bespoke support to large and dispersed groups of organisations; these might be developed in partnership with other funders. Such an approach might have two principal benefits: first, it could focus resources on developing a cohort of collaboration 'champions' who could, in turn, cascade the learning to other

organisations in their environment; second, it could also reach a larger critical mass of people as the method used would be cheaper than a face to face intervention

- Procure intensive practical support from third parties to advise, support and mentor VCS organisations about choosing appropriate collaborative arrangements. Recognising the intensity and cost of such arrangements, BIG might wish to focus this support on: particularly challenging forms of collaboration (eg mergers or partnerships between large and small organisations); geographical areas which have not enjoyed significant previous investment; sub-sectors within the VCS perceived as at risk of unnecessary failure or closure
- Pilot and study all of the above to improve the service and share learning with other organisations
- Review and modify BIG's existing guidance and resources about partnership working. Based on participants' comments in this study, we suggest the following for consideration in any revised guidance:
  - Who is the guidance for? BIG's existing guidance tends to focus on partnerships with public sector leads although its content is relevant to any kind of collaborative working
  - What is the guidance for? BIG's existing guidance tends to focus on formal partnerships, although BIG is also interested in informal collaboration such as peer learning
  - If BIG partnerships are likely to be led by VCS organisations in the future, then sections on the following, with appropriate emphasis, will be important:
    - thinking about collaboration (articulating function of collaboration and using this to identify appropriate form of partnership)
    - getting ready for collaboration (financial management and collaborative management and governance)
    - managing collaborative working (becoming 'collaboration aware' in order to recognise common problems and borrow solutions from others through peer learning)
  - Introduce readers to a wide variety of formal partnership structures, including group structure and sharing back-office functions, as well as merger and consortium formation
  - Specific guidance on the following issues tailored to the needs and circumstances of VCS organisations:
    - dealing with legal responsibilities
    - meeting monitoring and other reporting requirements
    - budgeting for and managing the costs of partnerships

- A review and signposting to recent research and guidance about collaborative working. First, materials produced through the Capacitybuilders national support service<sup>2</sup> (including Collaboration Benefits<sup>3</sup> as well as work streams on outcomes and IT which tackled some of the challenges of collaboration). Second, materials produced through the national Partnership Improvement Programme, which focused on cross-sector working between VCS organisations and public sector agencies
- The addition of some contemporary case examples that illustrate recent challenges of collaborative working and expand on the role of the VCS.

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<sup>2</sup> Capacitybuilders has now closed. The resources collected through the national support service remain available via The National Archives at

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/search/?query=www.capacitybuilders.org.uk&where=url>

<sup>3</sup> Collaboration Benefits was one of the Capacitybuilders national support services. A final report about collaboration support delivered during the programme is forthcoming: IVAR (2011 forthcoming) *Practical support for collaborative working: lessons from a three year programme*, IVAR/Locality: London.

## Part Four: Implications

In Part Three of this report we set out our findings in relation to the aim of this study: “to explore how the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) can support its voluntary and community sector (VCS) applicants and grant holders to collaborate more effectively and so deliver their agreed project outcomes more successfully in a changing environment”. We focused in particular on study participants’ experiences and ideas about:

- The changing drivers of collaborative working
- The challenges of collaborative working, both within the VCS and across sectoral boundaries
- Ways of overcoming those challenges
- Support needs for collaborative working
- Future options for BIG.

In this final part of the report, we begin by summarising what has changed and what is different about contemporary collaboration, before specifying areas that require urgent attention. We then conclude with a brief reflection on what our findings mean for BIG itself.

### 4.1 Introduction

Our findings will add to existing knowledge about the drivers and challenges of collaborative working, as well as support needs. In addition, the research has pointed to a number of options for BIG in tackling its aspiration to: “support its VCS applicants and grant holders to collaborate more effectively and so deliver their agreed project outcomes more successfully”.

Nevertheless, the picture that emerges from this short piece of research is incomplete. The significant gaps in our understanding about contemporary collaboration include: information about the financial successes of consortium formation; the processes, costs and benefits of collaboration between the VCS and private sector; and the medium or longer term trends in consortium formation, sharing of back office functions and merger. Whilst participants expected medium-sized organisations to be worst affected by changes in the VCS operating environment, we do not yet have the evidence to support or refute this. This is due to the short timeframe of this study and its timing, which comes soon after the announcement of public sector cuts; their full effects remain unclear.

### 4.2 What has changed, what is urgent?

We learned that VCS organisations may collaborate in order to survive financially (a *reactive* strategy), but that this may put strain on their mission, ethos and values. We also found that, if organisations can take the initiative in discussions about the kind of collaborative arrangement they want (a *proactive* strategy), they are likely to be better placed to handle the challenges they face and realise the benefits of working together: “being proactive seems likely to assist you in the choices you then make; it may lead to greater ownership and buy-in to the collaboration which must be an ingredient of

success". The more conscious an organisation is of the complexities and dynamics of collaborative working, the more productive and beneficial their collaborations are likely to be.

However, despite the apparent advantages of proactive collaboration, our research confirms that, as the context for VCS organisations has shifted dramatically - "*there are changes within organisations and the sector is changing with bodies dropping out*" - the opportunities for careful and considered collaborative working have shrunk. Collaborations are increasingly being entered into as a defensive reaction to policy, financial and market pressures; organisations have to agree partners and structure their collaboration quickly. For some organisations, this problem is made worse by their continuing lack of certainty about local authority budgets and the survival of actual or potential partner organisations.

Given this, what can be done to reconcile the tension between urgency and the need for preparation, time and resources?

### **4.3 Future options for BIG**

BIG is ideally placed to lead new ways of thinking about collaborative working. We suggest that attention might now be paid to four areas.

#### **i. Thinking about purpose and avoiding the risk of instrumentalism**

Our research on cross-sector partnership working (IVAR, 2006; 2009) confirms the prevalence of partnerships that are formed without any coherent or shared sense of purpose; a lack of time spent on identifying the goals of coming together often contributed to collaborative failure. More recently, in our review of ten years of research on collaboration (IVAR, 2010a), we found numerous examples of there being different understandings of the purpose of collaboration – both across the organisations involved and within single organisations. These earlier findings reinforce the importance of an articulated and shared purpose in effective collaboration.

At a time of increased external pressure, however, VCS organisations in particular may not have the luxury of time, or the opportunity for reflection. The pressures to make decisions about collaboration are intense, increasingly so in the context of funding requirements. The risk here is that, when organisations decide to collaborate, they choose a partnership model (*form*) without taking time to think about what they want from a model (its *function*). The findings presented here, though, would support a shift in focus away from the *form* of collaboration to its *function*. Those examples of successful collaboration that we are able to identify indicate that function needs to be seen primarily in relation to a beneficiary group, locality or social problem to be addressed. Although attempts by funders to adopt a more instrumental approach might lead to the formation of partnerships, it seems unlikely from our study that those partnerships will be durable or effective, as they will lack some of the critical ingredients set out in 3.3.2 above.

**ii. Adapting application processes and communications**

This shift is likely to require modifications to the way in which BIG communicates about collaboration, the expectations and requirements it places on applicants, and the support that it provides. In particular, opportunities need to be created to enable organisations to achieve a state of readiness for collaboration. If organisations are to be encouraged, or perhaps required, to submit joint applications for funding, there needs to be more sophisticated and supportive scrutiny of their collaborative arrangements. If BIG accepts that collaborative working is complex and can be difficult, then it may need to adopt more flexible and adaptable expectations at the application stage. This might include:

- Improved guidance for applicants (in line with the suggestions set out at 3.4.3 above)
- Longer lead-in times, to allow for the time and reflection required for successful partnership formation
- Some facilitation of the partnership formation and/or the submission of the application itself – this might be through the establishment of a partnership development and support service
- Checklists of requirements made specific to programmes
- Fuller scrutiny of all partners and their respective roles in achieving the partnership outcomes.

**iii. Developing peer learning and the use of new media**

There continues to be real enthusiasm for peer learning, within and across the four countries, as well as between UK VCS organisations and NGOs operating internationally. Within BIG's existing pool of grant holders, there are pockets of effective practice in this area, as well as significant clusters of organisations in urgent need of practical assistance. Given the intensifying external pressures on the VCS to collaborate, there is an urgent need for firmer, more proactive action to establish a more structured approach to peer learning and support, to focus on sharing knowledge and developing skills and confidence around specific aspects of collaborative working, including:

- The formation of partnerships
- Collaboration management
- Capturing and describing the achievements and value of partnerships
- Working across sectoral boundaries
- Managing difference (especially in relation to culture and size).

As part of this development, serious consideration also needs to be given to creative use of new media. Initiatives in this area might usefully be shared with other funders, especially trusts and foundations, many of whom are already exploring innovative methods of achieving more for less, in other words greater coverage of support for less upfront investment.

iv. **Reconciling BIG's agenda with organisations' needs**

As we have discussed already, BIG continues to be confronted with the challenge of reconciling the tension between breadth and depth in the provision of support, now in the context of an uncertain economic and political situation.

Although BIG has invested heavily in the provision of support for VCS organisations involved in collaborative working (for example, through grants from the BASIS programme for second-tier organisations in England), the design and content of that support has largely been driven by providers. In our earlier research in this area, for BIG and others (Cairns et al, 2005; IVAR, 2010c), we have argued for a shift in focus, so that the needs of frontline organisations and, in turn, their beneficiaries, are privileged in the process of designing, delivering and funding support services. Whilst there will remain an overriding need for BIG to articulate its own requirements and specify its desired outcomes, there may now be scope for developing collaboration support that is more closely attuned to the needs of applicants and grant holders. The unequivocal evidence from our findings is that, whilst collaborative working can yield significant benefits beyond the reach of an individual organisation, unless there is investment in preparation, formation, management and evaluation, the benefits risk not being realised. This kind of integrated support is not, therefore, a luxury or an add-on. It can be seen as critical both to the success of collaborative working and the accomplishment of BIG's own strategic objectives.

To take this agenda forward, BIG might invest in a series of experimental pilots across the areas outlined above, in which the very real and practical challenges of collaborative working are addressed meaningfully. In order to maximise the benefits of this kind of investment, consideration might be given to combining different elements of the support ideas generated by this research. For example, combining a focus on particular forms of collaborative working with online learning; or bringing together work on outcomes and effectiveness with new approaches to peer learning.

Although BIG's overriding concern will continue to be the effective accomplishment of specific outcomes for its end beneficiaries, our findings suggest a need for greater harmony between its processes and expectations around collaboration, and the needs and circumstances of its applicants. Such an approach has the potential to secure positive benefits for *all* concerned.

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