

Community Engagement principles and early considerations for the board

The aim of this paper is to share some of the key principles of community engagement, including examples of where this work is being done well and recommendations for the board to consider ahead of the away day. It's important to highlight that this paper should be considered ahead of the decisions around the locations that Blagrove are hoping to invest in as community engagement will be vital in landing in a location successfully and having the most (positive) impact.

Community engagement is about fostering strong and trusting relationships that are mutually beneficial and beyond being transactional with people in the community. Building relationships with people, who call an area home so that they can share information key to making informed decisions that will have the best outcomes for their local community and for themselves. So community engagement essentially comes down to building trusting relationships, and we do that following the below key themes:

- 1.) Trust (whilst this seems obvious, how is a bit more complicated!)**
- 2.) Time**
- 3.) Accessibility / Language**

Before looking at the key themes specifically, the first question we need to consider is:

Why do we want to do community engagement well?

At Blagrove, our mission is 'To bring lasting change to the lives of young people; investing in them as powerful forces for change and acting upon their right to be heard in pursuit of a fair and just society.' From this, we can see that we ultimately cannot do anything that will affect them without authentically listening to their needs and wishes. However, young people do not exist in silos, they are part of multiple communities – and it is these communities that will support them before they too become community members supporting the next generation.

To be values aligned, we need to ensure that we are responsible and intentional about how we engage with communities, which means working in ways that are collaborative, inclusive and equitable, adaptive, trusting and transparent – combining these values will mean that we are working in ways will grow trust and help us build strong relationships.

As we continue to move away from behaving as a traditional funder (A.K.A. awarding a grant, keeping a distance from the work and then chasing reporting), we need to learn new ways of working to develop and deepen our relationships within communities.

Although we're changing how we behave, it's important to acknowledge that we are still a funder – and there will still be power dynamics that come along with that – these aren't necessarily a bad thing, but they need to be acknowledged and work needs to happen as we transition our power and assets to the communities we're working with.

As the African proverb says “it takes a village to raise a child”. We therefore need to understand what is needed by these communities, to not only support themselves, but also their young people, to be mission aligned.

If we don’t do this well, then we could end up doing more damage to communities who we seek to serve by shifting financial burden and costs to communities, as well as ending up working with the wrong people, not offering the right support (an example of where charitable donations of buildings has gone wrong can be seen via [this short documentary](#) – whilst not entirely relevant to our work given the different context, the messages about the risk and harm we could cause are still very much relevant) . if communities don’t trust us, then we won’t be able to create deep and long lasting impact, we’ll struggle to transfer genuine power and we could end up centring ourselves instead of empowering the young people and communities in which we seek to serve. If we don’t do this well, we could hurt our reputation in the sector, along with our partnerships with other funders and most importantly the partners in change we exist to serve.

1. Trust

Building trust might sound like a simple task, but will be one of the more complicated things that we do. To build trust with a whole community, we’ll need to find common connections, be introduced to the communities via another trusted relationship, and then build on personable relationships through things such as, being from that area, speaking the language of that community, having shared identity/ies with members of the community. We then need to consider the power imbalances, **have they had negative or positive experiences with other funders before us? Will they view us as a funder? How do we connect as humans away from the existing power dynamics of working for a funder?**

We need to remember our power and privilege and try to learn how to move our relationships to beyond being just transactional, accepting that sometimes the benefit will be more for the partners/communities than it will be for us. We need to remember to not be extractive in this relationship, accepting that plans may change and we might not always receive what we wanted or expected (for example over one visit, we might not get all the answers we thought we would get to a particular question). We need to be intentional about the information we’re trying to gather, and aware of our power and privilege and not creating a dynamic where community members feel like “if I don’t do this then we won’t get the money” – it needs to be a genuine partnership.

Without trust, we won’t be able to see the realities of the community, the genuine community spaces that we’ve seen exist through our current partners such as [Urbond in Portsmouth](#) who run community events and projects such as women empowerment workshops or health and wellbeing spaces for the community, with a dedicated youth programme too – truly intergenerational community engagement that is ran through different community spaces or the [Devonshire Collective in Eastbourne](#) who use the arts to work with community members of all ages through free programmes and workshops, using ex-retail spaces in the community.

Whilst these key ingredients should help begin forming the basis for a trusting partnership and relationship, **there's no one formula for building trust** – it may take quicker or longer for some communities and it will look different in every space we enter, so we truly need to live our values of being adaptive, trusting, responsible, intentional and Transparent.

2. Time

Time is arguably one of the most important elements of good community engagement. Without allowing the time needed, it will be impossible to build trust – which can build quickly or take a lot longer. **The pace of this work can only work at the pace of the trust and relationships with the communities.** To give us the time we need, we need adequate capacity for this work – not allowing other external pressures to take over and leave us pushing the work forward faster than the relationship is building. We need capacity and time to ensure we're not passing our own stressors and pressures onto the partners we decide to work with and therefore onto the communities we want to work alongside.

We also need to truly be present with partners – attending their events, meeting them where they're at physically and in terms of time, sharing human moments with them, for example over food. **We need to remember that the communities we want to work with don't exist in our offices in London, and they also don't only exist Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm. We need to commit time and capacity to meeting them outside of these traditional hours where needed, and be flexible to accommodate this.** 'Meeting communities where they are' is shown through [Detached youth work](#) principles – which are about meeting people in the spaces in which the community engage with the most, being flexible in where and how we meet them. Whilst we're not necessarily practicing detached youth work itself, taking the principles of meeting people in spaces where they naturally exist and feel comfortable in feels important for us to take forward in building trusting, long lasting and impactful relationships.

We know the importance of time and capacity is paramount to community engagement success from the stories and experiences shared by both [MAIA](#) and [Civic Square](#) from our community wealth building visit to Birmingham. MAIA have spent the past 12 years "asking questions, posing ideas, enquiries, speculations and experiments in communion around visions for a liberated world."¹ They are now moving into a wider strategy and actioning even further for change, but it took them 12 years to get to this point. Civic Square believe it's space will be fully formed by 2030 having started in 2020, but the work and conversations began 5 years earlier via Impact Hub Birmingham. Both MAIA and Civic Square are known as key actors and pillars of their communities – proving that this work takes time and care, even when already starting as a member of the community, which Blagrove will not be.

¹ <https://www.maiagroup.co/work>

3. Accessibility/ Language

The language we use around how we want to do this work will be key, as it will be how we engage with the communities, how we listen to them and reach them where they are. This language can also be exclusionary if we're not careful, as we've learned, there can be a lot of Jargon and long complicated words that are hard to understand – even if people understand the theories and concepts. That's why it's important we listen to the language that communities are already using, and work with them to define how we wish to talk about this work and ensure we're all on the same page as we go on this journey together. What works in one area, may not work in other – so we need to take a human centred approach to ensure that all communities we work with are centred.

If we go into communities using the language that we choose, we risk not building trust, we increase the chance of miscommunication and we will be continuing to work in oppressive ways, using our power to 'do to' communities as opposed to 'do with'.

So how do we learn how to do this?

We'll be making at least one, hopefully 2, strategic grants to community partners who are already embedded and ready to do this work – through this we'll be able to explore the language that they use, the ways in which they find it most helpful to engage with communities, what communities in their specific areas need and want. It also gives us as an organisation more proximity to communities, allowing the team to understand the lived realities, seeing it and hearing it with their own eyes and ears, as opposed to speaking about it in theories and concepts from our Central London offices.

Working alongside these key community actors will also be vital to us gaining legitimacy in the community, as they will have had the time and trust already built. It would be impossible for us to enter a community, simply as Blagrove, and create deep impactful change overnight. **We cannot do this alone and will need to rely on community partners for our plans to be successful.** We must consider where in the country it's possible for us to build new, or build on existing, relationships with these pillars of community.

Recommendations on our approach and next steps:

- We should try to find who the key pillar community organisations are to explore who we can build or continue to build strong and trusting relationships with based on the areas we've decided to work with
- These community organisations should also already have started discussing / considering community wealth building, building ownership & be aligned with our own values and approach
- Invest in these pillar community groups to learn from and with them about how we may want to approach this work
- Work with the communities to begin exploring the language relevant to each community we work with and begin to build shared understanding and definitions

- Spend time in and with the communities – work from their spaces, attend their events, share lunch with them, invite them into our spaces too – build on the relationships via human connections.
- Commit to investing in the local community in other ways too, such as using catering services from small locally owned café's and restaurants.

Key considerations for the board to reflect on ahead of the away day

- When considering location, also consider where we may already have some existing relationships with key community organisations, or where it will be possible to build new relationships based on there already being the infrastructure to have these conversations with community groups. Also consider how we'd be able to connect with these communities as a team based on our human attributes (e.g. where we're from, how we speak, who we are generally as humans)
- This work will take time and need capacity to be done well – we should slow our timelines down accordingly to meet the needs of communities to avoid centring ourselves and adding unnecessary pressure to communities and our relationships.
- We're not starting from a point of being a community member – please consider how we can invest in already existing community organisations to take lead and ownership of this work from as early as possible.