

'Reducing social distance' starting with governance

Why we are moving towards becoming a youth led Trust and what this means

The Blagrave Trust has for many years along with numerous other funders, described itself as a relational funder - with all that that entails: building trusting relationships with funding partners; providing core funding and removing application or bespoke monitoring forms; gathering anonymous feedback; openly and transparently sharing our grants data and decision making. So far, so normal for any 'progressive' minded funder!

In addition, and perhaps more uniquely, we've also focused outside the resource intensive and potentially distracting lens of charity / funder dynamics, to an explicit recognition of the essential role of 'end users' of services at the grassroots as key to driving social change – in our case young people aged 14-25. To this end, we've tried to raise the debate about how organisations including ourselves listen to and act upon what they hear from their key stakeholders; to challenge funding partners to know what young people think about their organisations and not just the 'intervention' that affects them, and more recently set up the Listening Fund (www.thelisteningfund.org). This frees up resource to advance learning on how organisations can go beyond basic participation to actually enable young people to lead change. All 8 funders of the LF are participating in an external review of funder practice which we hope will generate important learning and open up the space for greater discussion. So far, so good we hope.

But recently at a conference 'Losing Control', when talking about his life's work with people experiencing homelessness, Maff Potts from Camarados quoted a great inspiration of his, the activist Srdja Popovic in saying - 'it's all about reducing social distance'. The simplicity of that concept really resonated. You could categorize all our above efforts as just that: reducing the distance between charities and their end users; between funders and their grantees; and between funders and those they ultimately seek to serve.

But we've wrapped up that important concept – of being closer to the issues we work on in order to understand them better and more deeply - into a multitude of policies and practices. And doing so has allowed us to side step the reality: that it's the distance between people with power and those they profess to serve that ultimately helps to perpetuate a system that works for some but not for others. A distance between people that's stark, set in the context of a society where young people in care are routinely failed by society; where those young people facing homelessness may have jobs but simply cannot afford a roof over their heads; and where a whole generation of young people are experiencing unheard of levels of poor mental health.

We may pat ourselves on the back for the difference our funding can make, but our jobs in trusts and foundations are comfortable and privileged, and our responses to reducing social distance are inadequate.

This is why the Blgrave Board have recently supported the recommendation that we should become a youth-*led* rather than a youth *focused* funder. And, our starting point will be governance.

What does that actually mean?

Put simply that we will continue to listen carefully and take decisions with as well as for young people, and we will play our part in enabling young people to become leaders now and in the future. We've been on this journey for some time but now we want to go further. We will transition to a Board of young people, from diverse backgrounds and with experience of the 'issues' we support, following in the footsteps of great organisations like the British Youth Council.

There are so many good reasons for doing this many of which are neatly framed in the well-meaning lexicon of our sector: 'valuing lived experience'; 'supporting participation'; 'enabling diversity'; 'building the next generation of leaders', 'shifting power'; 'accountable decision making', bringing 'fresh perspectives' – no doubt readers will be familiar with them all.

But it's also fascinating to listen to the barriers we put up in favour of the status quo in governance. Questions about representation (as if boards as they stand are representative); about skills and knowledge in areas such as charity law and investments (both areas where expertise can be readily sought); young people in particular are subject to particular assumptions about their knowledge of finance or their capacity to fail (yet various charity scandals of late have not been averted by adult experts!).

But I've been profoundly struck by the sense that there is one compelling and overriding reason for doing this that we'd do well to discuss – and that's Srdja's words about reducing social distance – from the 'top' of our organisation through to the work we fund at the grassroots. That feels to me like a deep value and a place of integrity. We have recognized that we can model a different kind of philanthropy, and we have a responsibility to do that to the best of our ability.

We will be learning as we go and openly invite anyone who can help us and share their experiences of transforming governance to get in touch.

(We're also thinking deeply about how being youth led affects our new strand of work on policy and structural change, and will share our reflections on that in a second blog)

Jo Wells