

How collaboration can help deliver better heritage projects

Benefits of cohort working and when to use it

Cohort working can benefit grantees and funders in different ways and it is especially suited to certain types of projects and programmes.

Sharing knowledge, skills and ideas can improve projects' ways of working and final outcomes, helping them achieve **greater, more sustainable and resilient impacts**. While cohort working requires more resources than traditional grant making, these long-term, sustainable and innovative benefits are often worth the costs.

This section outlines why and for whom cohort working approaches are useful, exploring mutual benefits and those specifically for funders or grantees.

Mutual benefits for grantees and funders

Improved impact and efficiency

A cohort approach can generate wider-ranging and more meaningful impact for the same amount of investment, by allowing cohort members to be more ambitious and draw on resources and knowledge from each other.

More innovative ideas and approaches

Cohorts provide a space for grantees to brainstorm, spark new ideas and drive creativity where new ways of working are needed. Grantees can encourage each other to push boundaries and promote creative solutions.

Frameworks for support

Cohort working puts in place a structure that encompasses and connects different types and levels of support. The structure, including peer-to-peer support and enabled by a cohort coordinator and support staff, provides a flexible framework to allow the reliable and consistent delivery of support once cohorts are established.

Creation of mutual understanding

Mutual understanding and respect in cohort working builds long-lasting, productive and supportive relationships between funders and grantees, Senior Investment Managers and ROSS consultants.

Grantees in successful cohorts feel able to express their needs, knowing funders will listen and respond appropriately. Funders are comfortable asking how grantees' aspirations align with the funder's own goals and strategy.

Driving systemic change

Successful cohort working drives systems change by trialling, implementing and embedding change simultaneously across a set of grantees in order to drive progress at a faster rate. Whether grantees are being encouraged to think differently about diversity and inclusion or produce a more innovative method of delivering a skills programme, cohort working promotes and develops new ways of thinking more easily than would occur with traditional grant management.

Benefits for funders

Raising ambition

The traditional funding process of giving grants at the start and monitoring outputs at the end may not always deliver the best outcomes at programme level. Many grantees will need encouragement, monitoring and challenge consistently throughout delivery to ensure objectives are delivered. Cohort working approaches provide structured and consistent support to help them achieve and exceed their original aims.

Where cohort working is appropriate, the initial investment in bringing projects together and building capacity in the cohort will pay off over time through improved collaboration and lasting impacts.

Improved change management

Cohort working approaches require coordination and careful design at the outset but, once established, the management processes can help manage and track change more efficiently.

Cohort working also allows funders to steer change more effectively when required. When a group of grantees works as a cohort, it is easier to ensure they take a coherent approach to change. This is especially important in response to external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced grantees to adapt quickly. Assessing alternatives across a cohort programme enables a more coherent, and potentially more efficient, approach to change. Clear, centralised guidance applied across a cohort enables more effective implementation.

Cohort working can help develop a culture that is more open to change and can enable funders to drive and manage change among grantees, with less resistance than may be encountered in traditional grant management approaches.

More effective stakeholder communications

Cohort working enables a programme-wide, unified message to be conveyed to internal and external stakeholders, which maximises communications impact.

The volume and diversity of activity within a cohort is also likely to enable a stronger communications presence through access to more communications content, and a wider reach through appealing to a wider range of audiences.

Strong delivery relationships

Successful cohort working builds connections that persist with delivery partners such as coordinators, consultants, partners and experts. This enables funders to grow their network over time, creating and maintaining relationships with a wide range of organisations and stakeholders. Such networks can be useful to inform and shape future programmes.

Benefits for grantees

Continuous support

Grantees in a cohort can share ideas and seek support on several levels, such as brainstorming with peers, accessing support from specialist advisers such as ROSS consultants, and working with groups or individuals through training organised and facilitated by the funder. Investment by cohort members in each other's success can make this support even more valuable.

Improved skills and knowledge

Training, knowledge sharing and skills development can improve grantees' individual technical capabilities in specific areas. New knowledge can come from external sources, but the cohort coordinator and supporting consultants should also tap into the skills, experience and knowledge held within the cohort and ensure learning is shared.

Encouraging creativity

Collaboration helps generate and test ideas, leading to more creative, innovative approaches. When grantees work together, there are more people to bounce ideas off and problems can be looked at from different angles to deliver creative

solutions.

Cohort working also encourages creativity through the reduction of risk. One grantee may pilot an activity, allowing the rest of the cohort to use it as a case study. Risk is reduced and shared, with grantees learning lessons and applying them in the context of their own projects.

Creation of a network

Cohort working strengthens grantees' connections with each other during project development and delivery, but these connections can also persist beyond the programme's lifetime and have legacy impacts on the strength, resilience and connectedness of grantee organisations.

Informal networking between cohort members is a sign of the cohort forming a lasting group.

Increased effectiveness in individual delivery

Drawing on the collective knowledge and experience of the cohort, grantees can avoid mistakes and move more quickly to best practice, enabling them to become more effective and efficient in delivery. With increased efficiency and effectiveness they may be able to achieve more overall with the funding they have secured.

When cohort working is most suitable

Cohort working can benefit both funders and grantees, but the approach may not be right for every programme.

High potential benefits

Programmes seeking innovation and transformation

Cohort working creates a learning environment that encourages the generation and sharing of ideas and provides support for development and implementation. These are ideal conditions to enable change within individual organisations in the cohort. Collectively, this simultaneous change within a group of organisations can become a movement and catalyst for wider change across the sector.

Organisations building capacity and skills

Cohort working is one method of making resources, training, expertise and specialist advice available to grantees for whom such resources would otherwise have been inaccessible or unaffordable.

It is also an ideal environment for learning and so is particularly suited to organisations with a focus on capacity building and skills development as a core part of their project.

Organisations without their own networks

Organisations without existing ties to local or thematic networks, for example if they are geographically isolated, recently established or relatively new to the sector, may benefit from increased opportunities to connect. Cohort working can be especially helpful for such organisations to gain access to specialist knowledge and best practice from more experienced grantees and their wider networks.

Organisations moving into new sectors or areas of work

Those trying to take on new activities can benefit from peer support to build innovation and push boundaries. Support through a cohort may also benefit established projects that share a similar heritage or culture, but which are geographically isolated from other organisations.

Low potential benefits

Programmes already in the delivery phase

It can be challenging to introduce cohort working retrospectively once a project is under way, as both project culture and delivery mechanisms will have been determined. Cohort working should be introduced in the development phases of funding programmes. If cohort working is already in place, it should continue through delivery and will continue to be beneficial to grantees and the overall programme.

Organisations delivering through well-established, tried-and-tested models

Organisations comfortable with their ability to deliver a project efficiently and effectively may not find the emphasis on exchange and innovation inherent in cohort working to be an efficient use of resource. Those with extensive experience in a particular sector and focused on continuing or scaling a particular project without adapting their approach may not feel the need for a cohort.

Organisations looking for short-term impact

Cohort working requires an initial investment of resources and time to produce meaningful results. Organisations facing pressure to generate outputs and measurable impact on a very short timeline or modest budget may not be well positioned to benefit from cohort working.

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