

Pr\*pel



# Funding change and changing funding

What we've learnt from the  
first two years of Propel

Powered by





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# Introduction



It's been five years since 67 funders came together to give out over 3000 grants to support the communities hardest hit by the pandemic, through the London Community Response. Investing over £57m, funders prioritised groups led by and for communities experiencing racial inequity, LGBT+ communities, Deaf and Disabled people, women and girls.



The London Community Response showed us that collaboration at pace and scale is possible. It also showed us that when funders and community groups come together to pool their knowledge, funding and experience, we can make lasting change.

Following the London Community Response, funders in London made the commitment to “*work together with funders and partners from across sectors through London Funders to develop collaborative funding programmes that invest in London’s communities for the long-term, supporting the recovery and renewal of civil society beyond covid-19*”. They also agreed to “*to be bold, acting collaboratively on issues that are bigger than any one organisation or sector, experimenting and taking risks so that we can solve problems and deliver impact at scale. We’ll work to share power, to prioritise equity and justice, and to be accountable to each other and the communities we serve*”.

These commitments formed the founding principles and focus for Propel – which is made up of 12 funders, five equity infrastructure organisations and now, 131 funded organisations. In October 2022, Propel opened for applications with funding focusing on three ‘missions’ set out by the London Recovery Board – the body which guided the capital’s post-covid recovery. These missions were:

- A New Deal for Young People: enabling more disadvantaged young people to benefit from quality mentoring and youth activities and powering systemic change and sustainability within the youth sector



- Building Strong Communities: all Londoners will have access to community resources, ensuring they can volunteer, get support and build strong community networks. A strong civil society will ensure communities have the voice and tools to make London a more equal and inclusive city.
- Robust Safety Net: ensuring every Londoner is able to access the support they need to prevent or alleviate financial hardship and building a strong and sustainable advice sector.

Almost £45m has now been invested in 131 organisations, with 79% of the grants going to organisations led by and for young people, women and girls, LGBT+ communities, Deaf and Disabled people, and communities experiencing racial inequity.

Propel funders prioritised applications from organisations led by and for communities experiencing structural inequality and the civil society groups who are best placed to make change happen. Funders wanted to support them to explore, develop and lead collaborative and systemic approaches to tackle some of London's biggest issues. Funded organisations told funders that in order to deliver this work, they needed flexibility, patience and trust, and for funders to understand that change is complex. For many of the funders involved in Propel, this is a new way of working – the collaboration is asking funders to step outside of their own organisational cultures and commit to doing grant-making differently.

Almost two years since those first grants were made, we're bringing together the learning that has emerged so far to help inform the next stage of the collaboration and deepen our understanding of both what it takes to fund change *and* change funding.

The reality is that Propel has made some important initial steps towards turning shared long-term ambitions into action. These steps may feel small to some whilst feeling significantly risky for others: a single digital application portal to multiple funders, a shared reporting process, and a relational approach to progressing

from one grant to another. If we approach these risks in the spirit of experimentation, collaboration and solidarity, then we can build on them over time.

For this report, London Funders have brought together the lessons and insights from funders, equity partners and funded organisations. This is based on the insights captured by Propel's learning partner, Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), yearly reports from funded organisations as well as reflections from London Funders and our equity partners (more on the methodology and Propel learning approaches can be found below). We've asked funders and funded organisations to reflect on the partnership so far, to help us learn, and unlearn how collaborations of this nature can evolve and create change. We're really grateful for the openness and honesty with which this has happened, and we see this learning journey as something which will only evolve as Propel progresses.





# Overview of Propel





## The principles uniting Propel funders

A set of eight principles was co-designed with Propel partners to shape the way the collaboration worked together. They emerged as particularly challenging for funders to build processes and programmes around, and therefore the greatest opportunities to test ourselves.

### **Systemic**

Engaging with the whole system around an issue, tackling root causes not just symptoms, building a shared understanding of how systems can change

### **Bold**

Experimenting and taking risks together, influencing wider ways of working

### **Flexible**

Recognising that the future is uncertain, that funders and grantees are on a learning journey together, trusting grantees to respond to changing challenges and opportunities

### **Sharing power**

Recognising that everyone has something to contribute (money, knowledge, networks and reach), investing in people's capacity to co-design, embedding participation in decision-making from the start, building trust and confidence

### **Equitable**

Unlearning old ways of working, biases, and lenses on the world, ensuring that design, process and decision-making are inclusive and take account of the diversity of the sector and of communities

### **Non-partisan**

Recognising both civic and democratic leadership, combining the convening power of politicians with wider participation and voice

### **Long-term**

Investing beyond political and institutional cycles, providing stability for civil society partners and seeking to make transformational change

### **Accountable**

Jointly accountable to each other and to the communities we serve

At the same time as the principles were developed, we developed four shared ambitions, which were:

- To act collectively on issues that are bigger than any one of us, drawing on the relationships between us and the assets of us all and progressing in partnership towards a more equitable London
- To prioritise equity, inclusion and social justice – addressing structural inequalities for Londoners for transformational change
- To develop bold, innovative and creative programmes – sharing risks together to learn, unlearn and achieve more
- To achieve system-wide impact, focusing on solving big problems and delivering impact at scale

These principles and ambitions have been guiding the processes and culture of the collaboration. In spring 2024, we decided to review them, in order to articulate more clearly what changes we're seeking to make together. This will also help us design a long-term grant offer and communicate as clearly as possible to potential applicants what funders are looking to support long-term. The graphic on page 9 illustrates the refined ambitions, goals and outcomes Propel partners want to achieve together.

## Our shared ambition

To act collectively on issues that are bigger than any one of us, drawing on the relationships between us and the assets of us all and progressing in partnership towards a more equitable London.

## Our strategic goals

To prioritise equity, inclusion and social justice – addressing structural inequalities for Londoners for transformational change

To develop bold, innovative and creative programmes – sharing risks together to learn, unlearn, and achieve more

To achieve system-wide impact, focusing on solving big problems and delivering impact at scale

## The outcomes we want to deliver

### Propel funding:

- enables led by and for organisations to build leadership, voice and partnerships
- generates a deeper understanding and evidence of the link between led by and for organisations, systems change and equity and justice

Lived experience and grantee voice is embedded into every stage of funding programmes

Simplified and streamlined application, assessment and monitoring processes.

Offering long-term grants, core grants, flexible grants.

Communities experiencing structural inequalities come together to understand and analyse their experiences and identify actions

Communities and partners (including funders) take action together to tackle structural inequalities

## What success looks like (within Propel)

At least 75% of long-term funding from Propel goes to led by and for organisations.

Demonstrable changes to funder process within Propel and more widely within Propel funders - moving to deeper relationships between funders and led by and for organisations.

Collaborative /common approaches to grant application, assessment, monitoring and reporting.

Co-design and participatory involvement in decision making/ grant making are embedded

A cohort of organisations receives long term support to progress their own agenda, both financial and non-financial

Funded organisations report having more time to respond to the changing needs of service users, to address systemic issues and to learn.

Communities experiencing structural inequalities are able to challenge systems and lead change.

Funding partners bring decision makers from across the system to interact with communities experiencing structural inequalities

## The wider impact or change

Propel shifts the dial on structural inequalities

Equity Partner involvement in funding programmes beyond Propel leads to increased flow of funding for led by and for organisations

Funders and funded partners understand how to enable the conditions for change

A positive shift in the relationship between funders and civil society.

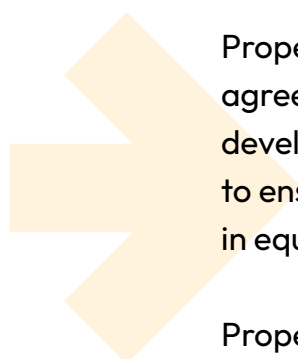
The achievement of change at each domain of power (interpersonal, community, organisational, structural)

Communities can identify benefits from having addressed systemic and structural issues.

**Underpinned by the Propel Principles: systemic, bold, flexible, equitable, sharing power, non-partisan, long term, accountable.**

## Who is involved in Propel and how it is governed?

Propel is a collaboration made up of funders of different sizes and sectors – including public, corporate, and independent foundations.



Propel funders work together across the collaboration, from agreeing the priorities for funding and the grants to be offered to developing shared reporting frameworks and assessing applications to ensuring the strategic development of the collaboration is rooted in equity and justice.

Propel funders might be contributing funding and/or their time, resources and expertise to the development of the collaboration.

Propel is supported by five equity partners who represent a diverse intersection of London's communities, to ensure the collaboration is embodying the shared principles at every step of the process. They act as a critical friend, bringing knowledge, guidance and challenge. Propel's equity partners are HEAR Network, Inclusion London, LGBT+ Consortium, The Ubele Initiative and Women's Resource Centre.

IVAR acts as Propel's learning partner, leading the collective learning network for the collaboration, helping everyone who is involved in Propel to understand how change happens. And Outlandish is the tech partner – they have designed an online portal that makes applying for funding simpler and more accessible.

The governance of Propel is delivered through three collaborative groups:

- **Strategy:** made up of senior decision-makers from across the collaboration (both funders and equity partners) who develop and agree on the collaborative strategy and goals for Propel.



- **Operations:** made up of operational leads across Propel funders and equity partners. They design, refine and implement collaborative processes that are aligned with the Propel goals and principles (including single application forms, shared reporting forms and guidance for applicants)
- **Communications:** made up of communication leads from Propel funders and attended by equity partners as needed. They agree on the communications strategy and outputs for Propel.

London Funders holds the collaboration together, convening, supporting and driving forward our shared ambitions to tackle long-term and systemic issues facing London.




John laing  
charitable trust



MAYOR OF LONDON



## The different grants funded through Propel



**Explore grants** were designed to give organisations capacity over one year to identify the systemic issue they wanted to explore; engage with the communities affected by this issue and explore with them what change is possible; how to deliver this change and identify who they need to work with. 28 organisations received an Explore grant, totalling over £1.3 million.

All funded organisations who received an Explore grant were given the option to apply for a further two years of funding – an **Expand grant** – to continue their exploration and begin putting plans into practice (including piloting and testing new approaches to creating change). 12 Expand grants have currently been awarded so far.

**Deliver and Develop grants** were given to 62 organisations for up to three years. These grants help organisations expand their existing delivery, scale up an existing partnership or build a new one across the system they are seeking to change. The total amount of funding for Deliver and Develop grants is just over £24.5 million. Funded organisations that received this grant were also given the opportunity to test and articulate assumptions about the changes they wanted to see and gather evidence to understand the impact, and how their work could be scaled through a long-term grant.

30 organisations received a two-year Deliver and Develop grant, rather than three years, and were offered the opportunity to apply for a one-year extension, referred to as **Extend grants**. Funders are still in the process of discussing some organisations' requests, but at the time of writing this report, 23 Extend grants have been awarded.



## Propel's approach to learning



When Propel partners sat down to consider the monitoring and evaluation of Propel, they were keen to capture what funded organisations are learning about change, and the conditions needed in order for change to happen. Recognising that it takes time to see the impact of systems change work, funders wanted to work together with funded organisations to learn how change happens and what is needed to support those delivering it.

Driven by Propel's principles (and paying particular attention to flexible, equitable and sharing power), funders acknowledged the burden of reporting on funded organisations, striving to design a simple process. In line with Propel's principle of accountability, funders are also required to report on what they are learning about funding change.

It became clear that most funders requested the same, or similar information from funded organisations when reporting or applying for funds, the only real difference being the language used or number of questions asked. London Funders worked with IVAR to design a shared approach that takes into account the Open and Trusting commitments, to which most of the Propel funders have signed up.

Across operational and strategic levels, the majority of funders agreed to use a shared approach to reporting. Some funders are going one step further – completing the report on funded organisations' behalf after a project visit. However, not all of the Propel funders were able to use this shared approach, and so some funded organisations were required to do more traditional reporting on outcomes. This demonstrates the challenge for funders of being able step outside of their 'normal' systems and structures.

The learning and reflections from funded organisations in this report have been gathered based on end-of-year reports, and 'halfway check-ins':

- **'Halfway check-ins'** are an informal alternative to a mid-project report delivered either through an in-person project visit, or a call. They're chats between funders and funded organisations, loosely structured around a handful of questions centred on learning so far, and support needed to continue. Funders write up notes to share with funded organisations, and upload them to Propel's digital portal, saving funded organisations the burden of capturing the information.

Writing up the notes from these meetings acted as a form of active listening for funders, really ensuring that they understood the work, challenges and successes of the organisation, improving their overall depth of understanding. Funded organisations reported back that these meetings confirmed to them that funders do trust their expertise.



**Driven by Propel's principles (and paying particular attention to being flexible, equitable and sharing power), funders acknowledged the burden of reporting on funded organisations, striving to design a simple process."**



- **End-of-year reports** capture learning from the project so far, shifting the focus away from outcomes and outputs and instead honing in on what funded organisations are learning about change, and the difference their work is making. The majority of Propel funders opted into a shared reporting form, with some funders co-writing end-of-year reports with their grantees. The questions funded organisations were asked to answer in their end-of-year report included:
  - What difference is your work making for the individuals and communities that you are working with? Do you think that your work so far is contributing to wider change?
  - What did you learn about the issue you were exploring and what change might be possible? OR (depending on the grant) What are you learning from your work about how change happens?
  - What do you plan to do in the next year?
  - What support has been useful from funders or from the Propel partnership? And, looking forward, what support (financial and non-financial) would be most useful to you?

Funded organisations have also been invited to share feedback on the Propel experience through IVAR, which is included in this report.

Funders' learning and reflections have been gathered primarily by IVAR who conducted a series of interviews at different stages of the collaboration. Additional reflections have been included following regular debriefs at certain points in the collaborative process.

# Funding change

What are organisations learning about the conditions needed to create change with and for their communities?

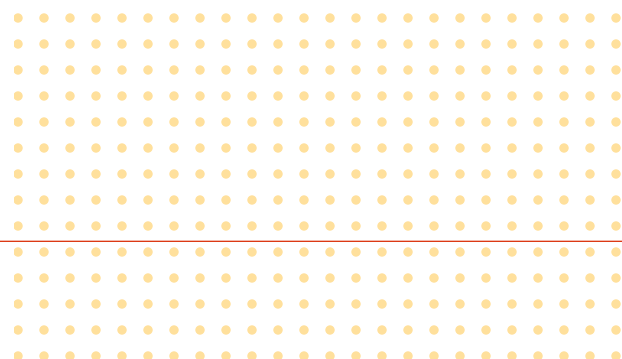


The learning gathered so far shows that funded organisations are laying the groundwork or ‘sowing the seeds’ for systems change to happen. Some are in the earlier stages of stepping outside their usual work of service delivery to explore how they respond to the systemic issues impacting their communities; others are creating spaces and structures for bringing community voice to the centre of their systems change journey.



Through interviews with funded organisations, IVAR has found that there are significant variations in how systemic change is interpreted and carried out across the Propel collaboration. Despite operating in differing spaces and at different speeds, working with communities ranging from Deaf and Disabled organisations through to young, black, LGBT+ people, for many of the funded organisations, a sense of newness and exploration was palpable across the reports, even just six months into some of the projects.

This is reflected in the original design of Propel, with two different grants being offered (Explore and Deliver & Develop), in recognition that funded organisations are at different stages in their systems change journey. There are also some funded partners who are arguably not yet at the stage of ‘changing systems’ but are acknowledged as having a critical role to play in the process of *‘tackling root causes not just symptoms’*. In this instance, Propel funders see their role as strengthening and stabilising these organisations so that they are in a position to engage in and contribute to systemic change work in the future. Below are some key reflections about what we’re learning from funded organisations about how change happens.



## How organisations ‘led by and for’ communities experiencing inequality and injustice change systems

Working with Propel’s equity partners, funders recognised that Propel should prioritise organisations led by and for their communities because they are uniquely placed to drive change – they are often set up and run to directly respond to the inequality and injustice their community experiences. ‘Equity-led’ or ‘led by and for’ organisations are often operating at the grassroots level, with staff and trustees living or working within the communities they serve. This proximity creates high levels of trust and accountability with and to their communities as well as a deep understanding of the issues or specific injustices that they experience.

Through our work with equity partners, we are deepening our understanding of organisations ‘led by and for’ – namely that they often empower individuals to challenge self-stigma and internalised oppression, actively rejecting the use of power to maintain the status quo and building anti-oppression. There is a strong focus on empowering communities to understand, use, and uphold human rights, and to campaign and organise for social justice.

“Our organisations are rooted in the revolutionary traditions, philosophies and practices of ‘led by and for’ movements that have created global systems change: achieving significant structural advances in equity, inclusion and rights for women, Black people and racialised communities, Disabled people and LGBT+ communities.”

Propel’s equity partners






Since the launch of the first grant programmes under Propel, our understanding of what constitutes a 'led by and for' organisations has evolved. The application guidance defined 'led by and for' as:

“Applications from equity-led organisations will be prioritised (i.e. they will be assessed first). By equity-led, we mean organisations led by and for marginalised communities, in particular:

- Communities experiencing racial inequity
- Deaf and Disabled People
- LGBT+ People
- Women and girls

We define 'led by' as when more than 75% of an organisation's Trustees and more than 50% of staff members (including senior) are people from the community or communities that you serve or have lived experience of the issues that your organisation is tackling. If your organisation serves more than one marginalised community, then the percentage of your Board and staff could also be from more than one community.”

The questions asked in the application form relied on what organisations tell us about themselves – it may therefore overestimate the number of funded organisations who are genuinely led by and for their communities (for example, many community organisations have a predominantly female Board and team without being specifically a women's organisation). For the long-term grant offer we are working with equity partners to refine our application and assessment processes so that we can more accurately capture which applicants are led by and for.



## Collaboration and partnerships

Funded organisations are actively working towards or already engaged in, partnerships and networks that seek to build community-based relationships with partners. These partners ranged from institutions such as schools, police, local authorities, housing associations, charities, local voluntary and community groups, through to individuals such as young people, people from the communities they serve, parents, teachers, carers, local councillors, community police officers and many more. Many funded organisations reported an improvement in the strength of these partnerships and that they're now being considered a core part of the local community architecture.

**“We learnt that finding the right partnerships and collaborators is key to addressing our issue of the marginalisation of young people from civic spaces.”**

Funded organisation

**“From our work, we have learned that real change happens when multiple parties align with shared goals and outcomes. For change to be effective at the individual, community, and societal levels, it must be approached as a multi-layered process, recognising that each individual and entity defines change differently.”**

Funded organisation

**“A collaborative ecosystem that involves diverse stakeholders (nonprofits, government agencies, philanthropic organisations, private sector entities, etc) is essential. Collective action and shared accountability amplify impact and foster innovative solutions.”**

Funded organisation

We're seeing an acknowledgement that change is near impossible to achieve working in silos. Funded organisations

recognise the importance of collaboration, emphasising how crucial it is to be value-aligned. Some funded organisations reflected that an understanding of intersectionality is essential here, and requires a nuanced understanding of specific needs. This is particularly prevalent in the women's sector for example, where disabled or racially minoritised women are disproportionately affected by inequality.

**“The systemic and structural challenges we’ve investigated reveal the complexity of our clients’ experiences in today’s environment. Our work empowers women to come together and speak up on the issues affecting them. Reductions in mainstream services, lack of funding for accessibility, and widespread systemic issues have disproportionately affected women.”**

Funded organisation

Collaboration includes funders, too. Funded organisations see funders playing a pivotal role in their work towards systemic change and that the role funders play is about more than their financial contribution: it is about how funders use their own power, expertise and connections to achieve our shared ambitions.

## Community Engagement and Empowerment

Many funded organisations emphasised the importance of working with people in the community with lived experience of the issue organisations are seeking to address. They did this through; creating spaces, supporting development, creating courses, fostering connections and bringing diverse community voices together, ensuring they had a safe space, and their wellbeing was cared for. These spaces created a trusted environment, catering to the specific needs of the communities they are serving, both from a cultural and user-led lens. Through these shared experiences and support from the organisations, they were able to carry out capacity-building activities where individuals with lived experience of the system were

able to build confidence, lead activities, develop skills and become community leaders, thus empowering individuals and communities to advocate for themselves.

**“Ensuring equitable access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes is fundamental for enabling marginalised communities to participate in and benefit from change initiatives.”**

Funded organisation

**“The success of the work so far has been driven by a relationship and person-centred approach, facilitated by our methodology in delivering the course content in a way that isn’t constructed rigidly, but is flexible to the needs, interests and wants of the women involved.”**

Funded organisation



## Policy development, influencing and advocacy

Many funded organisations are also focusing on how they can create change through advocacy, education and policy influencing. By tailoring their work to the needs of their communities, and directly challenging current policies (including immigration, housing, healthcare and education), funded organisations have used a range of approaches to advocate for alternative systems.

Some funded organisations were directly engaging with policymakers, through councils and the London Assembly, whilst also participating in public forums to influence policy decisions. Others are running campaigns on particular issues and focused on building up the evidence about the changes needed and sharing this to help influence policymakers and public opinion.

Funded organisations have also facilitated training and educational workshops with their own communities to empower them to make change themselves, encouraging individuals with lived experience to take on leadership roles, and ensuring that the voices of those impacted are heard directly.

**“To achieve systemic change, it is essential to engage policymakers, funders, and institutional stakeholders in advocating for policy reforms that address structural barriers and promote equity. Building alliances with key stakeholders amplifies advocacy efforts and paves the way for broader impact.”**

Funded organisation

Equity partners have also highlighted that Propel should explore how the collaboration can provide support to funded organisations for policy development and influencing at an infrastructure level. Influencing often takes a back seat because organisations rarely have a dedicated resource for it. While it is unrealistic to build this capacity in every Propel funded organisation, equity partners encouraged funders to see a collective effort, bringing organisations



together, working together to identify the issues and agree on who is best placed to tackle them. Going further, Propel funders need to explore the role that the equity partners can play in building the capacity of Propel funded organisations to deliver change, and convene a conversation about how this role would be supported.

### Testing, gathering evidence and learning

Many funded organisations noted that they need to build their evidence to be more successful in informing and influencing. Some highlighted that working in a more agile way – testing ideas, getting feedback and refining their work – has helped their advocacy efforts. Some of this was done through co-design with partners and community members, allowing funded organisations to develop their practices with community voices being involved.

Through this process of evidence and testing, several funded organisations reported that the barriers for community members were bigger than they'd thought. In some instances, they learnt that challenges arise from a lack of cultural understanding, compassion and time from those who hold power.

 Case study

# London Gypsies and Travellers

London Gypsies and Travellers (LGT) is an organisation which challenges social exclusion and discrimination, working for change in partnership with Gypsies and Travellers. It has four key areas of work, including:

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## Work and skills

Providing training for adults and young people

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## Homes

Campaigning for sites and supporting residents to have a say in planning

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## Equality and inclusion

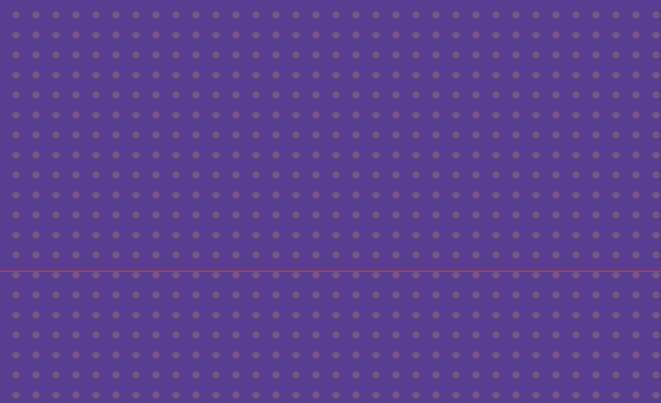
Highlighting discrimination and promoting rights

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## Young people

Empowering young people to shape their future

LGT's involvement in Propel is through their Bright Futures programme which provides mentoring, employability, and well-being support for young people aged 16 to 25 not in education, employment, or training.



## Systems change work to date

LGT's systems change work ultimately aims for Gypsies and Travellers to have greater influence over the decisions that affect them. While LGT aims to interact with numerous interconnected systems through its work, key areas include working with Local Authorities (Councils) across London, the Greater London Authority, and the Education and Housing systems.

Significant progress has been made in some areas, with key enablers being improved relationships and taking small steps towards larger system change goals.

## London Boroughs

LGT is working with Enfield Council, as one of a dozen Councils with which LGT has active ongoing engagement, to develop new permanent and transit sites, which are specialist accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers whose culture and heritage of nomadism is expressed in their preference to live in a caravan on a communal site. The Council now has a specific officer for Gypsies, Roma, Travellers, Showpeople and Boaters. Two caravan sites are in the process of being approved to planning applications in Enfield, where there is currently no specialist accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers.

The catalyst for these improvements stemmed from a legal case, which led to a process of required learning from the council to correct some of the issues raised. There was also a change in attitudes within the council, which meant community organisations were brought into some of the conversations about what needed to happen going forward. LGT maximised this opportunity to collaborate and problem-solve with the local authority to help develop workable solutions.

A key challenge is the lack of awareness of the issues faced by Gypsies and Travellers. LGT has proactively developed a training package for organisations like the Councils' Planning Departments to raise awareness and education. While progress was made in Enfield with regards to Gypsies and Travellers' right to culturally suitable accommodation, systemic barriers continued to aggravate the housing situation of Gypsies and Travellers experiencing homelessness in Enfield.

## Homelessness and Housing allocations

LGT works both with individuals and systems to ensure that Gypsies and Travellers' rights are upheld. Their work has involved strengthening relationships, including with specific housing officers in Enfield Council, individuals supported by LGT, and with partners and allies, such as Roma Support Group and the Better Temporary Accommodation Initiative (Trust for London) grantees. An immediate opportunity was created by presenting a joint report to the UN to raise awareness at an international level of the homelessness issues faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Londoners.

## The Education system

LGT's mentoring programme for young people was noted as an effective approach to supporting them to upskill in a person-centred way. This work has been "slow and steady" but demonstrates how incremental progress with individuals can lead to a lasting impact in communities, particularly in conjunction with addressing challenges in other parts of the system.

## Overarching complexities

There is also an overarching challenge around the complexity and diverse needs and priorities of the different Gypsy and Traveller communities. LGT plays a key role in understanding and advocating for the issues that matter to Gypsies and Travellers, but it's a challenge to represent the diversity of beliefs and perspectives, as there is often a lack of agreement, and some voices are louder than others. Therefore, the opportunity to capture and share knowledge, and support inter-community relationships in order to foster an impactful collective voice for Gypsy and Traveller people, felt crucial to establishing the foundations for system change.





 Case study

# The Africa Centre: Chakula Programme

The Africa Centre's mission is to educate, connect and advocate for Africa and its diaspora. The Chakula programme, funded by Propel, is a monthly series of events, workshops and dialogues geared towards supporting and empowering Black and African LGBTQ+ communities at The Africa Centre. The programme's aims are to:

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Mobilise as a community on events, research and advocacy

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Shape narratives or 'normative cultural ideals' by changing how knowledge is produced and stories told so that they take account of intersectionality and lived experience of African gay and trans people

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Ensure 'the role of African queerness is seen,' and that the The Africa Centre is an inclusive space.

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Facilitate international dialogue around African/Diasporan LGBTQ+ experiences, e.g. partnerships in Kenya

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Provide paid work opportunities for members of the LGBTQ+ community & particularly artists & freelancers.

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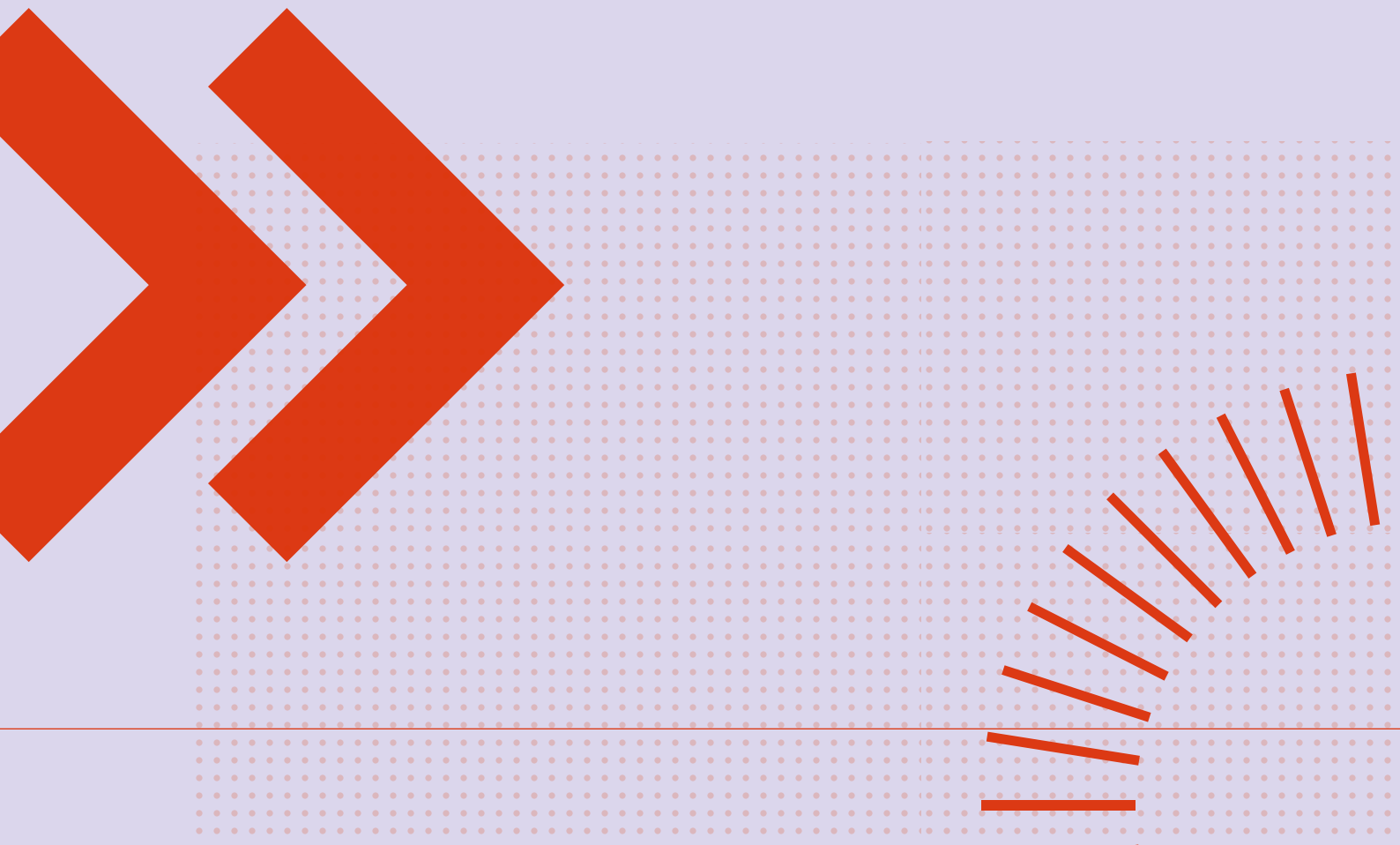
The resource of a full-time coordinator for the programme, along with the longer-term funding that Propel provides, has created some stability and capacity to think about the wider systems impacts that can be achieved via this work.

## The systems change journey so far

This work is at the beginning of its systems change journey. Capacity has been created, enabled by long-term funding, to start to think more strategically about the work and how it could have deeper impact and wider influence.

Now in year two, foundational steps are being put in place that support local systems to shift and have the potential over time to bring about wider influence and change. For example,

- **Creating opportunities meet and build connections** with each other regularly such as:
  - ‘Roots to Rhythm’ – brings creatives in to talk about music and their identity, helping them build a platform
  - Chakula Supper Club – gathering over food to discuss and reflect.

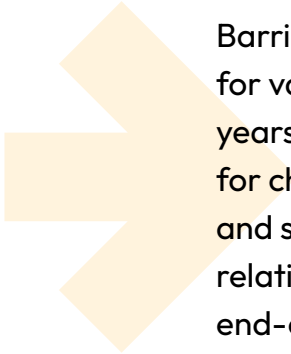


By building deeper connections, this sets a stronger foundation to work collectively to disrupt existing narratives that deny the existence of queer people in the African community.

- **Establishing a steering group.** Drawn from the LGBTQ+ African community, the people represented offer different perspectives, skills and networks including storytelling, research, and migration. The steering group will support Chakula activities as well as offering, *‘a way to think about the different objectives and the intersectionality that we want to address, and how we understand community work across different positionalities.’*
- **Providing a safe space.** The Africa Centre owns its own building and sees this as an opportunity to address a gap in the system – the lack of safe, secure spaces for Black and African LGBTQ+ people to meet.
- **Building an archive.** The Africa Centre has been around since the 1960s. Their work has been archived and over time this has become a significant resource. Despite African LGBTQ+ people being part of this history, the archive does not explicitly tell their stories. Work is planned to draw out the historical stories from the archive and to archive work happening within the Chakula project as it progresses. *‘If we are archived, they can’t say that we weren’t here.’*
- **Policy work.** The Africa Centre is exploring the potential to use the work happening through the Chakula project to influence wider policy and practice. The exact focus will be determined with their partners.



## What challenges are organisations facing on their systems change journey?



Barriers to creating change were felt across funded organisations for varying reasons. The unstable political climate over the last two years hasn't made it any easier for funded organisations to advocate for change and the constant shifts and changes in personnel, policy and strategies across government have made it hard to form relationships and engage in ever-changing conversations. The end-of-year reports, halfway checks and interviews with funded organisations have also revealed a number of other barriers, which we have themed and outlined below.



**We have learnt that both timing within the election cycle and the administration in power are vital indicators of whether change is possible or not”**

Funded organisation

### Getting things off the ground

Some funded organisations (particularly those who received an 'Explore' grant) reported that much of the work they've been funded to do is new for them and takes time to get off the ground. This might include taking steps to set up new spaces, planning and building partnerships or supporting staff to work in new ways. Some also reported that building trusted partnerships can take time, so there can be a challenging period before you start seeing the impact of your work.

**“A big learning is it takes time for change to happen, that it is necessary to dismantle a multitude of barriers faced.”**

Funded organisation

The staff and leadership of led by and for organisations, in bringing lived experience, are often directly contending with the issues they are trying to address. This can result in staff absence, challenges with retention, recruitment and staff turnover, and, particularly for smaller organisations, this caused delays to getting started on delivery.

Some funded organisations are also onboarding new staff for their Propel grant. Being able to build capacity through recruitment has been hugely beneficial for funded organisations, but it takes time before any tangible results can be recorded.

Understandably, for many funded organisations, there is a feeling of being overwhelmed when trying to reach systems, or professionals inside systems (particularly healthcare and/or local authorities). Some reported instances of gatekeeping, and time wasted trying to find the appropriate people to speak to.

**“We learned the extent of the gap in services, and discovered that while healthcare staff were interested and keen to learn, there was no service with overall responsibility for people with brain injury. This means there is a lack of accountability and potentially resources for people with brain injury.”**

Funded organisation



## Trying to create change against the backdrop of uncertainty

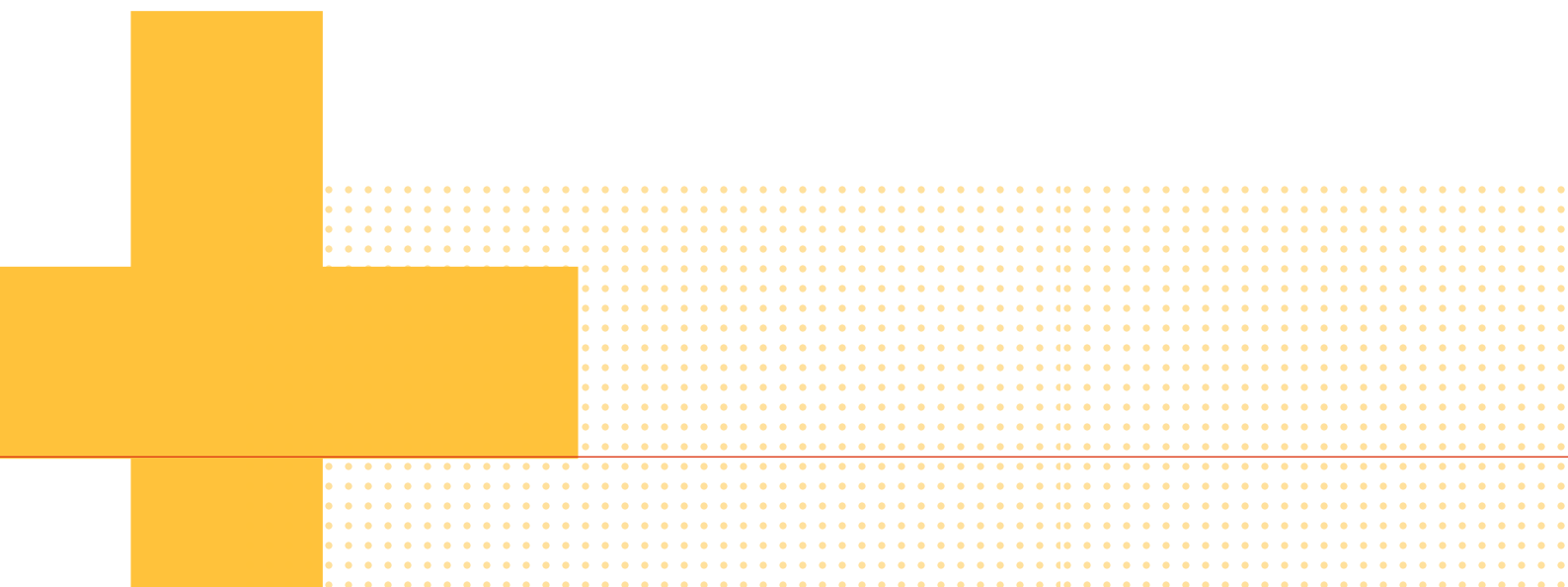
Funded organisations reported that the biggest barrier to creating change was securing funding for their ongoing work. It was a barrier that took up most of the time and headspace for organisations, compromising their capacity and inhibiting long-term planning.

Grants offered in the initial three years of Propel are a mix of one, two and three year grants, with organisations able to progress between them. These grants were specifically designed to enable funded organisations (and funders!) to explore the issues affecting their communities and the changes that might be possible, before moving onto a longer grant. Propel funders recognise that each short grant leads to the need to secure more funding, and in the next section we set out the steps funders have taken to make progression between grants simpler.

Many funded organisations have already spent significant time and effort to create partnerships, build up their evidence base and explore solutions to systemic issues showing up in their work. There is a concern from funded organisations that this work will be “wasted” without continued, long-term investment. There is clearly a case for longer term grants, and we set out our intentions in ‘Next Steps’.

**“We are a small team and every hour taken away from direct service delivery for fundraising puts pressure on our other staff.”**

Funded organisation



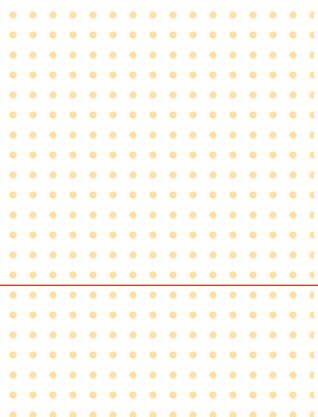
## Measuring change

Many funded organisations reported challenges measuring change. One barrier related to data gathering issues – different reporting platforms are being used, some of which are more robust than others. The second relates to the nuance of effectively capturing an individual's journey of change in a way that is meaningful and doesn't feel overwhelming to the individual concerned. This report reflects on the Year 1 learning reports from funded organisations, but we anticipate the greatest challenge for funded organisations is yet to come – being able to demonstrate community-level or systems-level changes.

We must also acknowledge the learned behaviour of funded organisations in relation to reporting. Organisations are used to reporting by numbers, and demonstrating the size and scale of their impact, rather than reflecting on the process of change. Propel funders recognise that a relational approach to grant management will help support the change in culture of expectations from funders to funded organisations, but that shift will take time.

## Impact of underfunding

48 of the 88 organisations funded through the first round of Propel did not receive the full amount they requested in their grant application. While there are a number of reasons for this (including removing ineligible costs during assessment, reducing the geographical focus, or seeking to spread the limited funding available across more organisations), Propel funders were keen to understand how underfunding impacts an organisation's work and ensure underfunding is avoided for future Propel grant applications. IVAR was therefore commissioned to interview seven funded organisations who had received less funding from Propel than they applied for. They were asked how this had impacted their work.





**I'm not sure the funders have a real understanding of how it works in the sector when you don't have enough funding. Funders need to have a greater understanding of how difficult it is for us."**

Funded organisation

The interviews carried out by IVAR show that some organisations had to reduce or completely scrap elements of their proposed activities or resource plans. For several, this included plans to carry out research and/or co-design processes to unpack current service needs and ensure the programme of work was led by service users. Others had to reduce staff wellbeing and training budgets. Most had prioritised pay rises in line with inflation, but to cover this, other parts of an employment offer were reduced. One organisation shared that their staff training budget is currently so small that other members of staff are offering their training budgets up so that training needed for roles such as programme delivery and staff wellbeing can be accessed. Another had to reduce their outreach services and cut staff benefits.

Some funded organisations reported that they had to reduce the scale of their systems change ambition when they received less funding, or funding for less time than they asked for.

For many funded partners, the underfunding of Propel work added to their already precarious situation, as they were already experiencing challenges such as a lack of consistent, long-term funding; staff burnout; reduced training opportunities; and heightened pressure on leadership to secure additional resources. Many funded partners managed underfunding by seeking out other funding sources. Whilst this had been successful in some cases, significant time had to be diverted away from programme delivery.

## What support has been useful from funders or from the Propel partnership? And, looking forward, what support (financial and non-financial) would be most useful to funded organisations?



Over the course of Propel, partners have had the opportunity to design new funding processes and find alternate, more relational ways of working, including developing application processes in collaboration with funded organisations, a less burdensome reporting framework and replacing forms with conversations. The final question for funded organisations in end-of-year reports creates space to understand what's working, and what needs a little more consideration. Below we have themed and summarised the feedback received from funded organisations:

- Facetime with funders is always valuable. The work that funded organisations undertake cannot be adequately captured in application forms or reports, it needs to be seen, heard and felt in order to be understood. Funded organisations are incredibly responsive to funders who take the time to visit their work.

**“Our Grants manager visited our organisation which was very good and the interaction was great. We really like such visits and we like more visits to our organisation and meet our service users and also visit our organisation when we do events/ celebrations or to our day-to-day services.”**

Funded Organisation

- Sharing the opportunity to develop new ideas and report together with funders is new for many funded organisations. Face-to-face visits support this work, although online can be just as valuable for co-creating project plans, or co-writing reports with funders.

This way of working has been very well received. However, it's important to note that collaboration is still on funders' terms, with their availability dictating the pace at which funded organisations can work. The quote below illustrates this challenge:

“In order to take up the funder's offer to conduct part of the reporting in person and involve the partners in the process, delays have occurred in order to find a date that the funder could attend. As reporting completion triggers payments for subsequent annual periods of the grant, this has resulted in a delay to payments, meaning we have had to use reserves while awaiting receipt of the funding.”

Funded organisation





- Prioritising flexibility has not gone unnoticed by funded organisations. Exploratory work is, by nature changeable, and so flexibility from funders on time frames, budgets and project outcomes is useful.

**“We have found the flexibility of the funders to be beneficial and would appreciate any continued flexibility.”**

Funded organisation

- Relational grant-making goes much further than just a financial transaction. Funded organisations have benefitted from training, networking and signposting, all of which have been made possible by funders taking more time to better understand the needs of funded organisations.

**“We were thrilled to have also been given the chance to receive filmmaking training to enrich our marketing and promotion tactics.”**

Funded organisation

**“We have received several support systems, trainings and learned measuring the outcomes and we have met other funders from Propel. We have also gained insights and learnt from other group discussion and been able to share our own experience, expertise and stories.”**

Funded organisation

# What are we learning about funding change *and* changing funding?



**‘Funding change’ in the context of the Propel fund is about ‘funding organisations led by and for groups experiencing structural inequality to explore, develop and lead collaborative ways of tackling some of London’s biggest challenges’.**



Funding change is in itself a step towards systems change within the funding sector: collaborating, trialling and testing new approaches to grant management and funding long-term are all steps towards doing things differently.

As the learning partner to Propel, IVAR has been working alongside London Funders, Propel funders, equity partners and funded organisations to learn about what it requires to meet such an ambition. For example, what does it take to put money and power in the hands of communities who are best placed to make change happen? How can the grants made through Propel help to build long-term collaborations that draw on the collective strengths and assets of those involved? In addition, IVAR has sought to draw on insights from their Open and Trusting grant-making discussions with a wider community of funders and voluntary organisations across the UK.

What we know from the experiences of voluntary organisations is that in order to deliver better outcomes for communities, the practice of grant-making matters. For example, voluntary organisations need funding that is flexible and enables them to respond to changing needs. Grant processes need to feel easy, straightforward and trusting, respecting voluntary organisations to know best how to deliver their missions. The desired change or impact from funding should be a shared endeavour between voluntary organisations and funders.

The principles underpinning Propel seek to reflect these practices. Two years into the collaboration, much has been learnt and, in some cases, already applied to funders’ grant-making practices

to reflect these principles. Below, we've brought together learning from IVAR, equity partners, funders and funded organisations to assess the extent to which progress against the Propel principles has been made.

## 1 Systemic

**Engaging with the whole system around an issue, tackling root causes not just symptoms, building a shared understanding of how systems can change**

Propel funders have spent significant time over the last six months asking whether we should define a 'Propel approach' to systemic change or whether we should 'let a thousand flowers bloom'. As a result of equity partner expertise, Propel has developed a broader understanding of systems change, recognising that what all of the various approaches have in common is the desire to tackle complex social issues and the causes of inequalities and injustice. Propel funders also recognise that organisations led by and for their communities are best placed to identify, test and adapt which approaches will be most effective in creating a more equal and just future for their communities, and that that the nature of led by and for organisations themselves brings an inherent focus on changing systems.

Recognising that 'systems change' is not meaningful language for many civil society organisations, Propel has offered a monthly series of "systems sessions" exploring some of these different approaches with friends and partners of the collaboration, encouraging funded organisations to share and reflect on their varying approaches, too. These sessions have in part been drawing on the deep knowledge and expertise equity partners have of systems change approaches. They are intended to build confidence and knowledge amongst the funded organisations and to be explicit that they, rather than the funders, are best placed to select approaches that work for their communities. Equity partners have also fed back to London

Funders that Propel needs to get the funded organisations ready to embark on the longer-term systems change journey, helping them understand the levers for change, develop new thinking, language, concepts and ways of working. This is something we're exploring how to do through the long-term grant offer.

Propel funders recognise that this work needs to be resourced flexibly over time and that the role funders play is about more than their financial contribution: it is about how funders use their own power, expertise and connections to achieve our shared ambitions. It is challenging for funders to shift their own behaviours and resources to work alongside organisations in pursuit of systems change.

However, the Advice Workforce Development Fund, a pooled fund held by the London Legal Support Trust with the Propel partnership, is an excellent example of how funders and funded organisations can work together towards shared systemic goals. The AWDF has established a steering group to oversee the strategic direction, made up of 20 organisations representing a variety of stakeholders including funders and funded organisations along with regional government. In addition, three task and finish groups, made up of funders, funded organisations and sector leaders, are exploring particular advice workforce challenges more deeply: on Pay & Conditions, building Organisational Capacity and developing a Pan-London Strategy. These structures enable funders and funded organisations to work in active and deep partnership.

The AWDF also focuses on funding partnerships rather than individual organisations. Using a pooled fund enabled collective decision making that some of the contributing funders would have struggled to replicate or resource if doing so alone – which in turn enables the collaboration and partnership that we hear from organisations is such a key part of the work they want to deliver.

## 2 Bold

### Experimenting and taking risks together, influencing wider ways of working

As with all systems, the funding sector can be set in its ways. There are often assumptions on both sides, with applicants and grantees guessing what funders want to hear and funders sometimes being too far removed from the work of civil society to fully understand the pressures that funding processes put on them.

When Propel's cohort of one-year Explore grants (funded not to deliver activities, but to take time and space to plan, learn and consider how they could address root issues facing their communities) approached their final months, funders considered how they could support their work to grow. We experimented with a process that removed the assumptions and guesswork that often come with application forms and homogenous guidance, opting instead for a chat between funder and funded organisation. With no set application form, deadline or set amount to apply for, grantees and funders worked together to create bespoke plans for a further two years of funding – Expand Grants.

Reflecting on the process of co-developing proposals with organisations, funders felt that this was a significant culture shift for both funded organisations and funders. In some respects, this was a success; funded organisations could apply for what they *wanted* to do, rather than what they felt they had to. Through a series of conversations, funders were able to get a better understanding of organisations' work and ambitions, with some finding the iterative process of co-developing work plans straightforward.



**As with all systems, the funding sector can be set in its ways.”**





For others, things weren't so plain sailing. Despite encouragement from funders, there was a reluctance from some organisations to share drafts of proposals, fearful that they would be held to account for things that may not yet be set in stone. Additionally, the flexibility around budgets and submission dates, meant that for some funded organisations, the process lacked the structure necessary to move plans forward at pace.

This is a good example of the complexity of changing practice, reminding us that much must be unlearned before we're able to truly create change in the sector. Propel funders recognise that longer term and larger grants will inevitably require an application form and deadlines for submission to enable collective assessment to take place in a timely manner.

### 3 Flexible

**Recognising that the future is uncertain, that funders and grantees are on a learning journey together, trusting grantees to respond to changing challenges and opportunities**

Much of Propel's ambition to be "bold", is coupled with the desire to be flexible, which can often be easier said than done. Currently, seven of the funders in Propel are aligned rather than pooled. This means that despite committing to shared principles and priorities, the funders are still working within their individual processes and procedures. For instance, funders may use a single application form and shared grant-making portal but still have to make important decisions internally, ratified by their respective boards or committees. We know from the feedback gathered so far that the experience for both applicants and funded organisations can differ, depending on which funder they are engaging with – for example, the additional information requested as part of assessment, the time taken to get a decision, the difference in the grant offer, terms and flexibility and the reporting requirements.

This is something we're working to change over time, and which can be addressed through pooling rather than aligning funds.

The flexibility that funded organisations are seeking is primarily to do with the kind of grants they receive. They tell us that funding designed to support systemic, equity-focused work needs to be core, unrestricted or lightly restricted, enabling them to respond to emerging needs or opportunities. Flexible and responsive funding also supports a test-and-learn approach, which is what Propel says it wants – but tightly restricted grants with defined outcomes are likely to work against this. Many of the Propel funders have good reasons for needing to restrict grants (this might be restrictions on their own objects, or requirements of stakeholders that funders are themselves accountable to) but are working towards making these restrictions transparent and as light as possible. One of the Propel funders gave solely core grants, and we're learning from the funders that are able to work more flexibly, and feed this into the design of the long-term grant offer.



## 4 Sharing power

**Recognising that everyone has something to contribute (money, knowledge, networks and reach), investing in people's capacity to co-design, embedding participation in decision-making from the start, building trust and confidence**

No one knows the funding sector quite like the people who have to navigate it. Propel recognises that in order to create change, the imbalance in power needs to be addressed, and the voices of civil society amplified. Whilst there's a great deal more to be done at our end, (with pooling funds being perhaps the most significant shift) here we can consider the impact of engaging with equity partners and funded organisations throughout the Propel process.

Our ambition to share power has been supported through the involvement of equity partners in every stage of Propel. The infrastructure of Propel is underpinned by three groups; Strategy, Operations and Communication all of which are made up of funders and equity partners. In addition to attending these groups as needed, equity partners also engaged in designing and delivering training for funders, reviewing decisions and shaping Propel's principles. Operations and Strategy group have taken a clear steer at every stage from equity partners about the groups Propel should be supporting.

Equity partners are not, however, currently involved in making final grant award decisions, another process made more complex whilst working in aligned rather than pooled funds. Whilst funders are required to follow their own, individual processes, bringing in additional decision-makers "*involves more layers*" to the process. These "layers" have a direct impact on funded organisations; funding decisions take longer, resulting in difficulties with staff retention and programme consistency. This is something we are looking to change and build into a long-term grant process, which will be announced later in Spring 2025.

Alongside equity partners, Propel funders are engaging regularly with funded organisations to understand what a long-term funding relationship with Propel should look like. In a network away day in November 2024, funded organisations shared their ideas about the key features of good systemic work, which have now formed the basis of the long-term grant eligibility criteria. We acknowledge there are challenges for funded organisations in being asked to feed into the design of a programme that will result in fewer grants, and Propel funders are grateful that funded organisations have been keen, open and thoughtful in participating in these discussions.

## 5 Equitable

**Unlearning old ways of working, biases, and lenses on the world, ensuring that design, process and decision-making are inclusive and take account of the diversity of the sector and of communities**

Propel's focus on equity has resonated strongly with funders, and many have prioritised supporting equity-led groups and embedding principles of inclusion in their grant-making processes. For example, one funder redirected some of its funding streams to support organisations led by people with lived experiences of inequality, particularly in areas such as migration and the arts.

Most acknowledge that they are still in the early stages of fully integrating equity into their funding models, and some expressed a need for '*deeper internal learning about structural inequalities to achieve more meaningful change*' in their practice. There also continues to be a need for greater clarity and agreement on what defines an equity-led organisation within Propel. For example, while the application form included three questions (using the DEI Data Standard) to assess whether an organisation's leadership represent the community they serve, such tick box questions mean organisations who happen to have a diverse board or staff team can say they are equity-led without having the political analysis

of what this means in practice. This is particularly an issue for women's organisations – many community organisations have a predominantly female Board and team without being specifically a women's organisation. There is a similar issue for the utility of the tick box exercise in identifying where an organisation is specifically working intersectionally as opposed to where an organisation might happen to be open to people from a range of communities. Being able to assess effectively whether organisations are genuinely equity-led and/or intersectional is an issue funders have been working with equity partners to resolve for long-term grants.

In addition, the active involvement of equity partners in Propel has helped funders to better understand the needs of smaller, equity-led groups, leading some to rethink their approach to sharing power in decision-making processes:



**Working closely with equity partners has helped us to incorporate these perspectives into grant assessments, allowing for more inclusive and representative funding decisions.”**

Propel funder

Reflecting on how Propel differs from other grant programmes, funders recognise that by funding a higher proportion of led by and for organisations, many of the people working in the organisations have lived experience of the issues being tackled and the barriers they're trying to address. For grant managers, this means engaging with people often experiencing trauma themselves.

Supporting community leaders with lived experience of the issue they're seeking to address has required a shift in grant management practice, including a greater understanding of staff wellbeing; allowing more flexibility to funded organisations, and a shift away from outcomes focused funding – a big culture shock for some grant managers.

“I've got much more close contact at the moment with some of the funded organisations through Propel than some of our other funding programmes; and although we are relational based, some of the ways of doing the reporting through conversations with Propel funded partners is very different to how we normally do reporting. That's helpful, because I've got to know them a lot better, and I can understand their challenges a lot more, and that's given me a window into the wider change that's happening for them as an organisation, and what they're wanting to do.”

Propel funder

## 6 Non-partisan

**Recognising both civic and democratic leadership, combining the convening power of politicians with wider participation and voice**

Being a cross-sector collaboration is one of the things that sets Propel apart, whilst also presenting some unique challenges. Several funders report appreciating the opportunity to co-design processes and learn from each other's practices. They say this has contributed to more consistent approaches to grant-making across the initiative, including application forms, flexible reporting and adapting funding approaches in response to emergent needs.

Another positive feature of Propel's structure is that levels of participation are not linked to the size of financial investment, helping to create a partnership comprising a broad range of funder ambitions and experiences (albeit that this diversity also presents



challenges, as we discuss below). This approach to collaboration has strengthened relationships between individual funders and equity partners, as well as between funders and funded organisations, fostering a culture of trust and open dialogue.

The culture of collaboration – *Being involved with the other funders in conversations around some of the details of what are we trying to achieve collectively, and what equity-led means* – has also enabled participants to build a better understanding of each other's restrictions and work together on shared challenges, including honest conversations about what's possible.

Engaging public funders is unusual, and something to be celebrated, but is not without its challenges, particularly around capacity to commit to long-term funding (for example, due to organisational constraints or reliance on political cycles).

## 7 Long-term

**Investing beyond political and institutional cycles, providing stability for civil society partners and seeking to make transformational change**

The importance of long-term funding to achieve systemic change is widely understood, and there is a shared ambition across Propel funders to secure more sustainable funding for funded partners. Plans are now in motion, testing ideas around pooled funds and strategic collaboration beyond traditional three-year cycles.

Working long-term provides us with the opportunity to trial and test new ways of grant management and decision-making over ten years, allowing us to learn what works, and crucially, what doesn't work. Whilst it's difficult to predict what Propel might look like after a decade of work, we can certainly hope to have advanced our practices in relational grant management, sharing the burden of reporting and bringing funded organisations into decision-making.

Pooling funds would optimise the opportunities to test these processes, as pooled funds can enable funders to take greater risks together than they would alone, and to act as each other's accelerators and brakes with some being more active than others at particular points.

## 8 Accountable

### Jointly accountable to each other and to the communities we serve

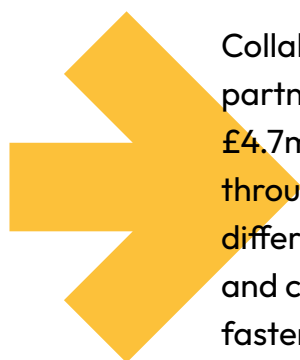
Whilst Propel funders were aligned with the long-term aims of the fund from the beginning, this is an entirely new way of working. To keep us accountable, and avoid slipping into old and comfortable patterns, we've taken a principle-led funding approach. Collaborating Propel partners have all agreed to a shared Memorandum of Understanding, setting out the relationship between partners, and the mutual commitments in terms of how we will work together to design, deliver and learn from the collaborative initiative. The principles – outlined in this section – ensure we push ourselves further by asking if the work we're doing is truly enabling us to create change.

Our learning partner IVAR supports us with this, asking funders the same questions as funded organisations are being asked in their end-of-year reports. Did you do what you said you would do? What are you learning about how change happens? What difference do you hope the work you are funding is making for individuals and communities? Do you think your work so far is contributing to wider change? And what support do you need to continue on this journey?

# What are we learning about collaboration?



**Convening 12 funders and five equity infrastructure organisations over a ten year period was never going to be straightforward – that’s what makes Propel quite remarkable. London Funders is working with new partners for the first time, supporting many organisations who are new to these funders, and working iteratively, developing the process as we learn.**



Collaboration isn't new for the funding sector, or for many of the partners involved in Propel. We worked with funders to distribute £4.7m in response to the Grenfell Tower fire, and a further £58.7m through the London Community Response to covid-19 – so what's the difference? Both of these collaborations were in response to crisis, and crisis requires us to override the rule book, temporarily adopting faster, simpler and more flexible ways of working.

We noticed that once the dust of crisis settled, funders quickly slipped back into old ways of working. It's clear that senior leaders in the funding sector recognise the benefit of working collaboratively and systemically – this is why they signed up to Propel and agreed to a shared memorandum of understanding. However, we're noticing, and hearing, a disconnect between some funders' ambitions for the partnership, and what's been possible to deliver from an operational perspective.

Collectively, the Propel funders are open, curious and willing to make change, but walking the walk hasn't always been so straightforward, mostly because it can be very slow to shift the internal systems and processes of funding organisations. We're noting that more of the people working on funding programmes have lived experience themselves, and how this is shifting ideas about what could be possible. This brings us back to the notion of sharing power: those working most closely with civil society need to be able to affect change, and they need the confidence and empowerment from their own organisations to do so.

We know that decision-making, particularly on larger grants, can be one of the things that funders like to hold close, but we see appetite to do this differently. Some of the Propel funders already invite participative input to decision-making, for example, the Young Assessors used by the GLA, whereas at other Propel funders, decision making committees or Boards are less likely to involve perspectives from those with lived experience of the issues under discussion. We've seen the impact of pooling funds e.g. through the Advice Workforce Development Fund, and how this has enabled different decisions to be made, drawing on the expertise of a range of funders and civil society organisations.

It is fascinating to see how funders of different types (public, corporate and independent) bring different approaches to risk, to decision-making, to accountability and transparency. We know that funders are learning more about each other and we hope that, through collaborating, they can draw on the best of each of us to generate new ways of working.

Whilst progress can sometimes feel slow, it's exciting to find out what's possible when we try new things. Extend grants, for instance, have demonstrated something that funders had never tried before; offering extension grants to other funder's grantees. Through Extend, funders have trusted one another's approach to due diligence. Sharing information between funders meant that funded organisations didn't have to keep re-providing information.

Perhaps the most joyous learning about collaboration has been seeing how the energy in the room when Propel brings funders and funded organisations together has changed – from initially distrustful and distant to a sense of a shared exploration and endeavour.

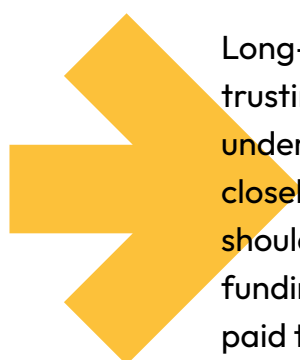


# Next steps





**Propel partners are now working on a long-term offer of grants and non-financial support of up to seven years, enabling organisations who secure a grant to continue their work seamlessly from April 2026. However, making seven year grants will mean funding fewer organisations, and is likely to result in grants for around a third of current Propel funded organisations.**



Long-term change work requires long-term, patient, open and trusting funding, achieved through relationships built on mutual understanding and respect. Propel funders have been working closely with funded organisations to consider what long-term grants should look like. Funded organisations have written the criteria for funding, and most recently, a group of funded organisations were paid to sense-check the process so far.

Building upon our learning of what is possible when funding in an aligned way, partners are exploring the possibilities of pooling funds which could further streamline the funding experience for grantees, embedding equity in decision-making and maximising the learning that is generated.

Currently, seven of the funders in Propel are aligned. The challenges of an aligned collaboration include the lack of consistent alignment and practice, consistent communications and consistent data and learning. Whilst all of the funders have committed to shared principles and priorities and use a single application form and grant-making portal, we know that the experience for both applicants and funded organisations can differ, depending on which funder they are engaging with. The results can also differ, with the proportion of grants funders have made to equity led organisations ranging from 100% to 50%, and different levels of understanding by assessors of what systemic work looks like.

There is already a small, pooled fund within Propel (the Advice Workforce Development Fund, held by the London Legal Support Trust). We have seen the different approach that the AWDF pooled fund is able to take in terms of working systemically alongside funded organisations and wider civil society to shift systemic and structural issues, and the progress that grantees have been able to make as a result.

Through pooling funding for the long-term grants, Propel funders would be able to:

- align funding practice and funder plus practice more closely with Propel's principles (Equitable, Flexible, Systemic, Long-Term and Bold).
- create a Funding Committee for a pooled fund that includes both representatives of pooling funders, equity and justice organisations and other relevant civil society groups, would also provide more equitable decision making (Sharing Power, Non-Partisan and Accountable).
- second a team to deliver a pooled fund would enable staff from funders to work alongside those from equity and justice civil society organisations, experimenting with new practices in relational grant-making and non-financial support, and develop learning that they will be able to bring back into the funding sector.



While challenging at times, this work is exciting – Propel is asking all of us to think outside the box, stretching our appetite for risk and doing things differently. What we’re working towards is a significant shift in funder practice, from creating a single point of entry for funder applications to co-designing application processes together with funded organisations and more. The decisions and processes underpinning Propel are rooted in the belief that to create change, *\*how\** we fund is as important as *\*what\** fund. It’s about giving organisations – especially those led by and for communities experiencing injustice – the stability, trust and sustainability to create change. The learning captured in this report will inform the next steps of Propel, but we hope too, that it will inform and inspire change in the funding sector more widely.



To find out more about Propel or share your feedback about our learning, contact [info@propellondon.org.uk](mailto:info@propellondon.org.uk). If you are a funder interested in joining the next stage of the collaboration, contact the London Funders team at [info@londonfunders.org.uk](mailto:info@londonfunders.org.uk).





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