



POP COLLECTIVES
END OF YEAR UPDATE 2021



INTRODUCTION

This document is an end of 2021 update on the current learning from Plymouth Octopus Project's POP Collectives Fund. It hopes to inform the ongoing conversation about charitable funding both locally, within the Plymouth VCSE community, and nationally.

As well as considering the evolution of POP Collectives, this document will comment on what we believe we are learning in the light of two changes made in 2021; the Spring funding review that helped to refine the structure of the Collectives Fund and the appointment of a new Learning Champion in August.

Since appointment, the Learning Champion has met, either virtually or in person, each of the funded Collectives and listened to their stories. Most of the observations contained within this document are based on first impressions from those meetings. As the Learning Champion conversations with Collectives deepen in 2022, so will POP's understanding of the POP Collectives Fund. Having said that, themes and patterns have begun to form and are helping POP to reflect and, where necessary, adapt the shape and delivery of the Fund along with hopes for the impact it might have.

EVOLUTION OF POP COLLECTIVES

In 2017, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation awarded £1.3 million to the city of Plymouth as part of a pilot project into place-based funding. The investment would enable the voluntary and community sector to build on the collaborative and transformative way in which it had been working and, at the same time, enable POP to develop its vision as a Council of Voluntary Services (CVS) fit for the 21st century.

As Caroline Mason, the Chief Executive of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, said at the time of the award:

"We saw a city that was working together to do things for the good of everyone rather than for individuals. We hope our funding will further inspire local people to affect change and transform the place they live. This is a bold new funding approach for the Foundation, making the best of all an area's assets, including organisations such as POP, with the aim of sharing learning across the voluntary, public and private sectors."

The ethos and structure of POP Collectives has grown out of the original Learning and Collaboration Fund, POP's first step towards collaborative funding. POP Collectives developed as a pragmatic response to the changes brought about from the first Covid lockdown and a desire to implement learning. In Spring 2021, a funding review shaped POP Collectives into its current form. It is an open-source, participatory, collaborative funding model with the following features:

- Funding of up to £5000
- Three or more separate organisations apply for the funding together
- Open submissions published on the POP website to reduce duplication
- Peer advice and rating by POP members to encourage relationship building
- Learning as the key outcome and indicator of success for projects
- Evaluation through ongoing conversation with the POP Learning Champion
- Open Collective, with fiscal hosting supplied by Accountable from the Social Change Nest, is used as a digital platform for all financial transfers

Instead of the more traditional, arguably limited, approach to funding where organisations in the same sector compete for a designated amount of money, POP's approach was radical: it would encourage organisations to learn to work effectively together, aiming to foster a spirit of regenerative collaboration. POP set wide parameters for which projects could be funded. A Collective would need to show clear social or environmental benefit to Plymouth, without

promoting religion. The broad scope of these parameters makes a participatory application process essential.

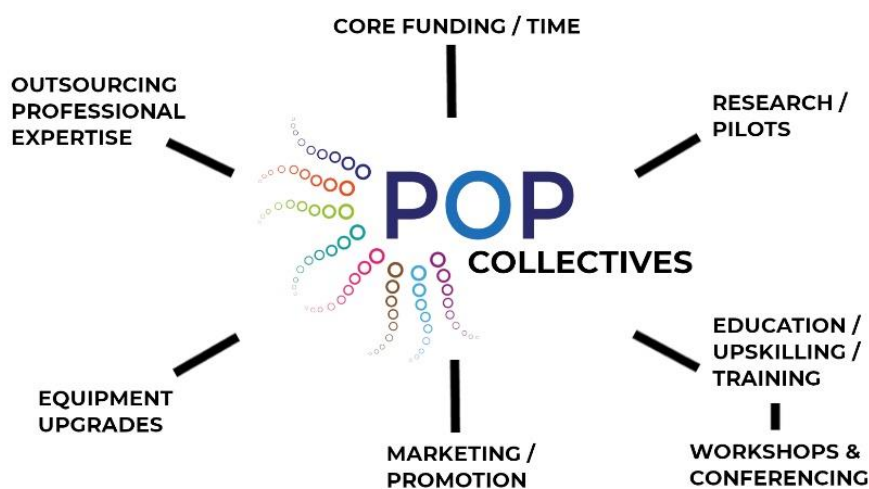
POP Collectives are primarily formed out of small (under £100000 turnover) or micro (under £10000 turnover) sized charities. These Collectives have generated a variety of short-term and long-term social and environmental benefits across Plymouth. At the same time, POP's collaborative, participatory model is contributing to a nationwide conversation about funding practice. Unlike traditional funding models, POP believes that the best way to evaluate Collectives is through ongoing conversation. Instead of presenting rigid questions designed to 'measure' different criteria, POP creates a nuanced, ongoing conversation with Collectives. This enables POP to articulate the practical ways in which funding policy can impact grassroots organisations.

What do collectives do?

Since October 2020, nearly twenty projects have been funded by the POP Collectives Fund with one project rejected at the rating stage.

From workshops preparing primary school girls for puberty to support agencies providing urgent items to refugees; from community art groups promoting wellbeing to opportunities for people living with disability to broadcast radio shows and podcasts, Collectives have worked together with invention, passion, and determination.

Patterns of how funds are spent by Collectives for social or environmental benefit are starting to be established. (See below) The most common investment is in education, upskilling and training.



FUNDING REVIEW DEVELOPMENTS

What Changed?

In Spring 2021, the POP Collective Fund was reviewed. Feedback from participants made it clear that the values at the heart of the Fund - collaboration, transparency and a participatory approach - were broadly supported by the Plymouth VCSE community. The review led to changes to the application process. The most significant changes were:

- The minimum number of participants changed from six individuals to three organisations
- The available award increased from £3000 to £5000
- The requirement to use Slack was removed

The first change is undoubtedly the most significant for fostering collaboration. With the previous requirement of six individuals, it was possible to form a Collective with one dominant organisation and still meet the criteria for funding. From the applications made since the funding review, it appears that the new specification encourages more of the type of organisational level collaboration originally envisioned by the POP Collective Fund.

It is too early to say what impact the increase to £5000 has had. It will be of interest to investigate if it can be proved a larger award results in higher applications and greater impact. Feedback from Collective members has shown that the amount funded is attractive to the grassroots organisations we hope to support. Veronica Graham of JC's Youth said that, '£3000 meant the world to us.'

There is also evidence from conversations with Collectives that the positive outcomes of collaborative working POP hoped to encourage with the fund are flourishing. One member of the Plymouth Eco Collective commented that, 'It has been of immense value to everyone in the Collective to be able to look each other in the eye and be real.' In the Plymouth Eco Collective, a collaborative group has been forged that share in each other's successes and challenges, providing work opportunities for each other and ad-hoc support. Five organisations within this Collective are currently involved in other Collectives, sharing their learning and strengthening the collaborative infrastructure of the Plymouth VCSE sector.

Removing the requirement for Collectives to use Slack was important. Although the intention for making Slack a requirement was to utilise a powerful learning tool that could record all Collective decision making and communication, most Collectives found it did not work for them. In hindsight, perhaps there were two issues here. Firstly, it could be argued that the Slack platform is stronger at sustaining existing team structures large enough to require multiple channels. Secondly, it is possible the start-up characteristic of each Collective, an understandable 'our house, our rules' instinct for ownership, was underestimated. Collectives did not want to be told how they were meant to communicate and Slack was perceived as an unwieldy process to set up and maintain.

With the removal of Slack, POP now intends to monitor learning through three interwoven, continually developing, conversations:

Inter-collective conversation	Ongoing POP conversation	Wider conversation
Members are trusted to establish healthy channels of communication within the collective that support the project's work.	Members stay connected to POP through regularly communicating with the Learning Champion	Members are encouraged to join a city-wide conversation with other POP members, learning from and resourcing each other for support.

What didn't change?

The funding review, and subsequent conversations with individual Collectives, indicates that the reasoning behind the Collectives Fund, its processes and requirements, remain unclear to a proportion of the Plymouth voluntary sector. POP is continuing to learn how to articulate our vision, growing in confidence not only in the effectiveness of our approach, but also in our role as a voice for an alternative approach to funding.

Following the review, some aspects of the POP Collective Fund remain unchanged. We are convinced that the rationale for our innovative funding approach is strong. We remain committed to learning, and sharing what we learn with others, to better support existing collaborations and encourage new ones. Our approach remains open, ethical, transparent, participatory, and rooted in our city. We are committed to our role as a digital champion within the voluntary and community sector.

We recognise that these commitments come with a cost. For example, we know that not everyone shares POP's enthusiasm for, or willingness to try, different technologies and digital platforms and it is important that we are mindful of this. Furthermore, we recognise that there are organisations and individuals doing great work in Plymouth who may be digitally excluded through lack of access, training or confidence.

That said, we maintain it is a good thing, and appropriate, that:

- all applications for the Collectives Fund are visible on the POP website
- we continue to invite other POP members to attend online 'advice' meetings for each application; to rate each potential project and provide feedback online
- we remain committed to using the Open Collective platform to transfer funds to the individual participants in the Collective

At the time of the funding review, we found that using Open Collective, with Accountable from the Social Change Nest acting as a fiscal host, was as controversial as using Slack. One Collective described using Open Collective as 'arduous' and 'ridiculously difficult' to set up. Another described the platform as a 'clunky mess' that 'assumes everyone has exceptional computer literacy'.¹

There are very good reasons to persist with Open Collective and small signs that, as organisations become familiar with the platform, the perception of its merits improves. The challenges that some Collectives have faced using Open Collective have often been in the setting up stage. Anecdotally, it appears the set-up process is gradually becoming smoother and faster. The strengths of the platform come into their own after set-up is complete. They are:

- the ability to hold money between organisations in a transparent way
- fiscal hosting meaning collectives do not have to be separate legal entities
- the abolition of financial reporting as collective expenses appear in real time online
- the freedom for each collective to write their own expense policy
- the opportunity for crowdfunding

It could be observed that the organisations who experienced the greatest difficulty setting up Open Collective have been Collectives made predominantly of a single organisation or where one organisation received most, if not all, of the funding. In these cases, Open Collective can appear an unnecessary obstacle between POP and the organisation's bank account. However, this kind of single entity collective was not anticipated. POP expects that the change from collectives of six individuals to three organisations will make this a rarer occurrence.

We hope the perceived worth of Open Collective to the Plymouth VCSE will grow with familiarity as its benefits, and the means with which it supports effective collaboration, become apparent. There are already signs of greater appreciation and acceptance:

- Four Collectives have published project updates on the platform
- Two Collectives have pitched for and received small amounts of additional funding at an Accountable online event
- Using the Open Collective for the £250 a POP funding has familiarised some organisations with the platform before applying for the POP Collective Fund

¹ 1: POP would like to state that Rowan, POP's comms and digital support, is held in universal esteem by the Collectives for his practical assistance in enabling organisations to adapt to Open Collective.

Questions for 2022

In the past few months, POP has started an informal internal conversation about how we might continue to build on the strengths of the Collective Fund application process and what changes, if any, might be needed. Questions raised include:

- Can POP make it easier for members to rate the collectives applying for funding?
- Is the current scale of 1-10 the most effective method for rating projects?
- What are the merits of incorporating video material into the application process?

FIRST IMPRESSIONS FROM LEARNING CHAMPION

The first round of conversations between the individual Collectives and the Learning Champion developed some clear themes that seem to apply more broadly.

1) Values Matter Most

The feedback POP has received from Collective conversations suggest it is shared values that create, sustain and direct collaborative work. For the Big Sis Girl Empowerment, their shared values impacted the way they recruited and trained their student volunteers. A commitment to shared values informed the Mayflower Drama Project's choice of working partners. Life After Lockdown and The Refugee Resettlement Support Fund both understand that shared values between colleagues help to sharpen a focus upon their respective service users.

When Collectives find it challenging to work together, it can be down to a conflict of values. Sometimes that could be because an individual member's priorities change. In other circumstances, it might be because differences within a collective start to dominate the internal conversation and, in time, begin to undermine commonalities.

POP's attempts to innovate with funding processes based on collaboration and learning allow Collectives to invest greater time and energy in what they are passionate about. Ironically, these processes combined with the value we place on trust and relationship are creating a funding culture that is not just 'all about the money'.

Therefore, it is imperative for POP that we keep sharing our values and continue to listen to what matters most to those whom we collaborate with. A case in point is Veronica Graham from JC's Youth describing how POP's commitment to change and innovation can feel daunting. She said, 'Every time POP did something, it was like a mental juggle.' Veronica also added, 'What POP has had has been perfect for what we've needed at the time'. Prioritising relationship and valuing what was important to this Collective, POP was able to help navigate through change to a successful outcome.

2) Differing Shapes of Collectives

An area of interest POP has begun to explore through the first round of Learning Champion conversations is about how the structural decisions Collectives make shape them into different entities. For some Collectives, like Plymouth Eco Collective, a close team feel is prioritised, with regular meetings and joint working. Some Collectives, like Chaddlewood Art and Nature Subway Project or Celebrating STEAM, have a strong leading presence and clearly defined roles for members to function in. Logistical realities mean that with a few Collectives, such as Digital Inclusion or Refugee Resettlement Support Fund, only one part of the team can work on the project at a time. These kinds of differences affect the experience of being in a Collective; influencing planning, communication, and decision making.

From an evaluation and impact measurement perspective, we are starting to perceive that understanding the shape of a Collective is as important as understanding their shared values. This is a consequence of designing learning as the primary outcome of Collectives. With more traditional forms of funding, a project's success is often measured by its ability to shape itself, sometimes artificially, around a funder's evaluation criteria. With POP Collectives, the collaborations are shaping themselves organically to their needs.

As more projects work towards completion in 2022, evaluation will need to take Collective shapes into account. Speaking hypothetically, it would be wrong to judge a rock band by their ability to be a successful relay race team, and vice versa, although both are examples of collaborative teams.

3) The Value of Flexibility

The POP Collectives Fund is attractive primarily to small and micro charities in Plymouth. POP knows the 'distinctive contribution and value'² of this sector within the VCSE. However, we do not romanticise small charity life as we have seen Collectives' hopes and growth curtailed by societal forces outside of their control. One Collective had to completely reinvent their project because of the first lockdown, while lockdown fatigue meant another Collective found it much harder to source donations in 2021. Some members of Collectives have had their funding or project progress impacted by unforeseen changes in larger organisations that they are reliant upon.

Local environmental factors also have an impact on the work of Collectives. Big Sis Girl Empowerment have had to learn to adapt their workshops to different environments. The rating stage for the Chaddlewood Art and Nature Subway Project took longer than expected, which contributed to most of the mural painting being placed on hiatus until spring. POP Collectives members are busy, time-stretched individuals, many of whom are involved in multiple projects.

Considering the array of challenges that face small and micro charities, POP must continue to model the value of flexibility in our approach towards the Collectives Fund.

This value has, in some cases, been key to some of the project's successes. The decision to set up the Collective Fund without the need for a detailed budget helped Kintsugi Radio upgrade their studio. Eric Hewes from Kintsugi noted that, 'it is hard to identify what spec's a studio needs to be resourced to', and 'what you think will make do [when you are budgeting] usually won't and you have to be able to stretch further.' POP's flexibility gave Kintsugi Radio freedom to buy the right equipment. In another example, our trust and adaptability enabled Environment Plymouth to pursue an opportunity that was not available when they made their original application.

Being a 21st Century Council of Voluntary Services means supporting grassroots organisations to increase their capacity in collaboration with each other, encouraging a culture of experimentation and learning. Working for this goal while maintaining the flexibility to respond to real world pressures with empathy, POP is confident that the Collectives Fund continues to have an impact on Plymouth and that it also contributes to the nationwide learning conversation about funding models.

² C. Dayson, L. Baker, J. Rees et al. 'The Value of Small', (June 2018) p.50
<https://www.vonne.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/resources/value-of-small-final.pdf>