CAF Resilience is a pilot programme designed to support ten small charitable organisations to increase their resilience over a two year period.

The insight we gain from the programme when added to what we know through our wider advisory work with charities will help us understand what does and doesn’t enable small charity resilience. We plan to share this learning with the sector to support thinking about how charity resilience can be encouraged.

We’ll also use the findings to help individual donors understand more about what small charities need, and encourage individuals to be bolder in the ways that they give. The programme was kick started by a major philanthropist and he was joined by others who saw the potential of this work. We’re going to use the learning to encourage more individuals to give in a way that enables resilience.

The first cohort of three charities has completed their first year on the programme and all the others have begun their journey. Whilst it’s still early days we wanted to share some of the things we’re seeing and our initial insights.
What we’re seeing

**Advisory plus funding**
When combined with expert advice, funding directed to free up the time of senior staff with strategic roles really makes a difference.

**Cohort approach**
Charities really benefit from being part of a cohort exploring organisational development – but only where they are not in competition for funding with one another.

**Similar challenges**
Small charities may be very different in terms of model, cause and geography but their challenges around resilience tend to be more similar than might be expected.

**Less is more**
Resilience can mean doing less but doing these things better, yet often charities feel that to be more resilient they need to be doing more.

**Funder ‘plus’ support**
Funder plus support is not being fully utilised. The ‘right’ help isn’t always offered, and often problems are addressed in isolation with someone who doesn’t know the charity well.

**Partnerships**
Finding good quality partners for collaboration is increasingly challenging at the same time as funders increasingly request joint bids and partnership working.

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**Potential enablers and blockers of resilience**

**Enablers**

**Recognise staff anxiety about change**
It takes up a surprising amount of time but without making space to communicate with staff and manage their anxieties, organisational development suffers.

**Stakeholder days**
A theory of change and/or vision day can really galvanise a charity by providing momentum and shared ‘buzz’ between stakeholders at all different levels.

**Maintain momentum**
Momentum is a key factor for trustee boards, both creating it and taking advantage of it to gain traction and support alongside decision making.

**Finances in perspective**
Charities’ financial health should neither be ignored and regarded as the responsibility of just one person, nor the only focus and indicator of success.

**Effective senior management team**
Often when a charity grows organically this is lacking, but developing an effective senior management team is crucial and unlocks so many other ‘problem’ areas.

**Prioritise strategic planning**
Often seen as a luxury compared to delivery, some charities almost need ‘permission’ to focus on strategic planning, either from funders or trustees.

**Targets around organisational development**
Having targets for organisational development in the same way as to a programme funder is perceived by charities as valuable.
Early thoughts for funders

It’s early days but our findings so far suggest that funders could support small charity resilience by:

- Recognising that charities need space to engage with complex organisational development issues and provide funds to backfill senior staff time.
- Ensuring that charities receive core costs in addition to project grants and are funded to have the time to take part in promotional or learning opportunities that the funder requests as part of their own wider agenda.
- Working collaboratively with charities when agreeing which types of funder plus expertise they will receive and when and how this is delivered. It should be provided by someone who understands their context and has taken time to understand what has already been tried before.
- Considering the benefits of cohorting charities with organisations unlike themselves to learn from each other’s experiences in developing the core of their charities, as it will encourage them to think outside of their own networks.

In summary, we would encourage funders and donors to think about how their support can help charities to address the enablers and blockers.

“Our wish is that CAF Resilience helps us to stop thinking about short-term survival and be able to focus on our work and beneficiaries in a much more planned way, as we did before things became so difficult for small charities.”
CAF Resilience programme participant

“The biggest unexpected benefit is the time to reflect and do things that we haven’t had time to do previously”
CAF Resilience programme participant

BLOCKERS

Difficulty identifying their core needs
Without external facilitation to explore the root causes, charities may misdiagnose and request help that won’t address their true issues.

Attempting to ‘outsource’ complex issues
‘Outsourcing’ complex issues by bringing in an external person appears less effective than releasing time for an existing, knowledgeable staff member to tackle it.

Negative mindset toward funders
Those charities that approach funders more like partners, are honest when things are not working, push back when needed and see reporting as an opportunity to educate supporters, are the ones that feel more resilient and confident about their future resilience.

Finance function that looks back
Resilience suffers when it is reactive, eg mostly reporting past spend to funders instead of focussed ahead on forecasting and fundraising.

Lack of time to really work through issues
Without space to really explore issues and follow through on changes, even the best expertise fails to make a real difference.
Meet the charities on the programme

The ten small to medium sized charities are from around the UK. Each one’s work has a ‘problem prevention’ focus.

“As we go deeper into exploring resilience with the charities, some of the learning may change as we see and understand more. However we hope these initial indications will be of interest to others who want to support charities to be able to deliver strong services now and in the future.”

Beth Clarke, Programme Manager, CAF Resilience programme

Talk to us

Email Beth at advisory@cafonline.org to talk to us about the CAF Resilience programme and the lessons we’re learning.