

THE CHARLES PLATER TRUST'S THEORY OF CHANGE

1. Background

1.1 In 2015/2016, the Plater Trust trustees commissioned NCVO Charities Evaluation Services (NCVO/CES) to carry out an impact assessment of all the grant making undertaken by the Trust between 2008 and 2015, by which time the Trust had funded 25 projects across its three funding themes distributing a total of £1,133,501 to 24 different organisations through six funding cycles. The trustees were keen to assess the effectiveness of the Plater Trust grant-making to date, so that the Trust could gain a fuller understanding of what the funding had accomplished, and crucially what lessons could be learnt to improve its grant-making in the future. It is the learning acquired through this independent strategic review process that has been pivotal in producing our first ever theory of change.

1.2 While a few years ago, the term 'theory of change' was largely unknown in the UK voluntary sector, increasingly today charities are turning to it, to help them define what their goals are and to orient a charity's activities to be more impact focused. Today, Plater Trust is keen to be as clear as possible about *what* change we want Plater Trust to achieve and *how* we think we are going to generate that change so that we can be more confident that all the activity we do at a day-to-day level is actually making a positive difference. Our theory of change attempts to articulate:

- i. What are the issues that the Plater Trust is trying to address?**
- ii. What kind of change do we want to promote?**
- iii. How will that change happen?**
- iv. What role should the Plater Trust play?**

2. Plater Trust's own operating change assumptions

2.1 Figure 1 visually articulates how Plater Trust is beginning to understand the long term intended impact of the Trust. It is based on several key operating assumptions that were articulated during our 2015/16 strategic review. These are:

- a) **Target applicant charity size:** recognizing the changing funding landscape that saw a trend for voluntary sector organisations with incomes below £1 million to lose more of their income from all sources between 2008 – 2009 and 2013 – 14,¹ we wish to mainly, but not exclusively, target charities of this size with Plater Trust funding as typically it continues to be these charities that struggle most to secure income.
- b) **Outcomes focus:** the 'triple jeopardy' trends² that we have experienced in recent years of diminished governmental support, increased grantee need and reduced foundation resources available as a result of reduced returns on investments, means that Plater Trust is increasingly concerned to focus even more on the outcomes we want to achieve individually and collectively, to ensure that we are being as effective as possible with our limited financial support.

¹ NCVO, *The Road Ahead*, 2016

² <http://www.acf.org.uk/news/brexit-and-the-role-of-foundations-first-thoughts> 29 June 2016

- c) **We are a ‘shopper’ funder type³:** As Plater Trust has developed since its inception in 2006, we are keen to develop our funding style away from our original ‘giver’ typology where we took a relatively relaxed approach to monitoring and evaluation, to develop instead into a ‘shopper’ funder, whereby we have greater clarity about what Plater Trust is seeking to achieve, and a more probing relationship with potential grant recipients to see if they are in a position to deliver on the Trust’s desired outcomes.
- d) **We want to encourage three different types of change** by our funding support. We accept applications that are trying to achieve positive change in one or any of the following three categories.
- i) *Outcomes for individuals:* achieving significant change for individuals that are most marginalised in the UK today;
 - ii) *Outcomes for organisations:* enhancing the capacity of organisations to respond more effectively to social need;
 - iii) *Outcomes for wider society:* generating social or systemic change through policy or practice change.

We do not expect one application to be able to generate change in all three categories, but we do expect applicants to be clear in their application about what type of change they are aiming for with their planned programmes and activities, and how they will know if they have been successful in reaching their change goals. Our own impact assessment of our past grants, broadly reflect the overall view that as a Trust we are having most effect in producing outcomes for individuals who are most marginalised in society. But the Trust’s funding also appears to be producing some important outcomes for the organisations it funds. However, outcomes for wider society are less evident, although this is not surprising as this is a very big task. It is also an area where it is difficult to assess the outcomes in the short and even the medium term due to the length of time required to achieve and evidence a wider societal change. It is also an area where no one Trust can really expect to have significant impact working alone.

- e) **We don’t just fund Roman Catholic organisations:** Some of our most successful past grants have been given to organisations who are not Roman Catholic or Christian, but whose objects are clearly aligned with Catholic Social Teaching principles. For example, we funded the charity, *Storybook Dads*, who had no connections with the Catholic Church or any particular faith tradition. However, their project was clearly aligned with Catholic Social Teaching, supporting as it did the emotional bond between imprisoned parent and their children, to nurture family life.
- f) **We favour grant applications based on quality data:** We know that attributing direct causal relationships between funds provided to organisations and the changes they report, is an almost impossible challenge. Generally, we prefer it when intended

³ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/grantmaking-tango-issues-funders>

outcomes are assessed by measuring change against a given baseline prior to any intervention, and then again, after the intervention, so that the beneficiaries journey of change is clearly tracked. But we also know that this is not always possible. In every case, we are interested in organisations evidencing the change that they have created as a direct result of Plater Trust funding using whatever measurement tool seems most appropriate. We want to encourage applicants to go further than simply supplying anecdotal or unsubstantiated evidence of change. And we are always open to conversations with applicants about how applicants can strengthen their own outcome data collection plans. As a new condition of funding from September 2021, we will be asking all successful applicants to provide us with a short blog for the CPT website to explain what change their project funded by CPT is or has achieved.

- g) **We favour grant applications that are collaborative in nature:** We particularly welcome collaborative joint applications between organisations as we believe this fosters better learning between organisations, more effective change and more efficient use of existing resources.

- h) **We favour applications that aim for high levels of service user involvement:** Plater Trust believes that having beneficiaries at the forefront is crucial to achieving change. Ideally, we prefer applicants to show us how intended beneficiaries have had a say in the way applicant's programmes and activities are designed and evaluated. Our application process therefore asks applicants to be clear about how they have involved users, how applicants have secured user feedback and how they use this to ensure that their planned activities genuinely reflect beneficiary needs. But we also know that user involvement is far from easy or straightforward in practice. And there may be times when the vulnerability of service users makes such involvement inappropriate. We therefore encourage potential applicants to be honest about the scope and ability of their organisation to do this. We refer all applicants to the useful tool for understanding the different levels of user involvement - *The ladder of participation* - developed by Arnstein in the US in 1969, which still holds relevance today.⁴ It has been widely used and adapted to describe the different levels of user involvement in different contexts.

⁴ We recommend the ladder of participation adaptation developed by Futurelab in their publication on learning engagement as a useful summary. Please see, Tim Rudd, Fiona Colligan and Rajay Naik (2006), *Learnervoice – a handbook from Futurelab*, p.11.

'LADDER' OF PARTICIPATION

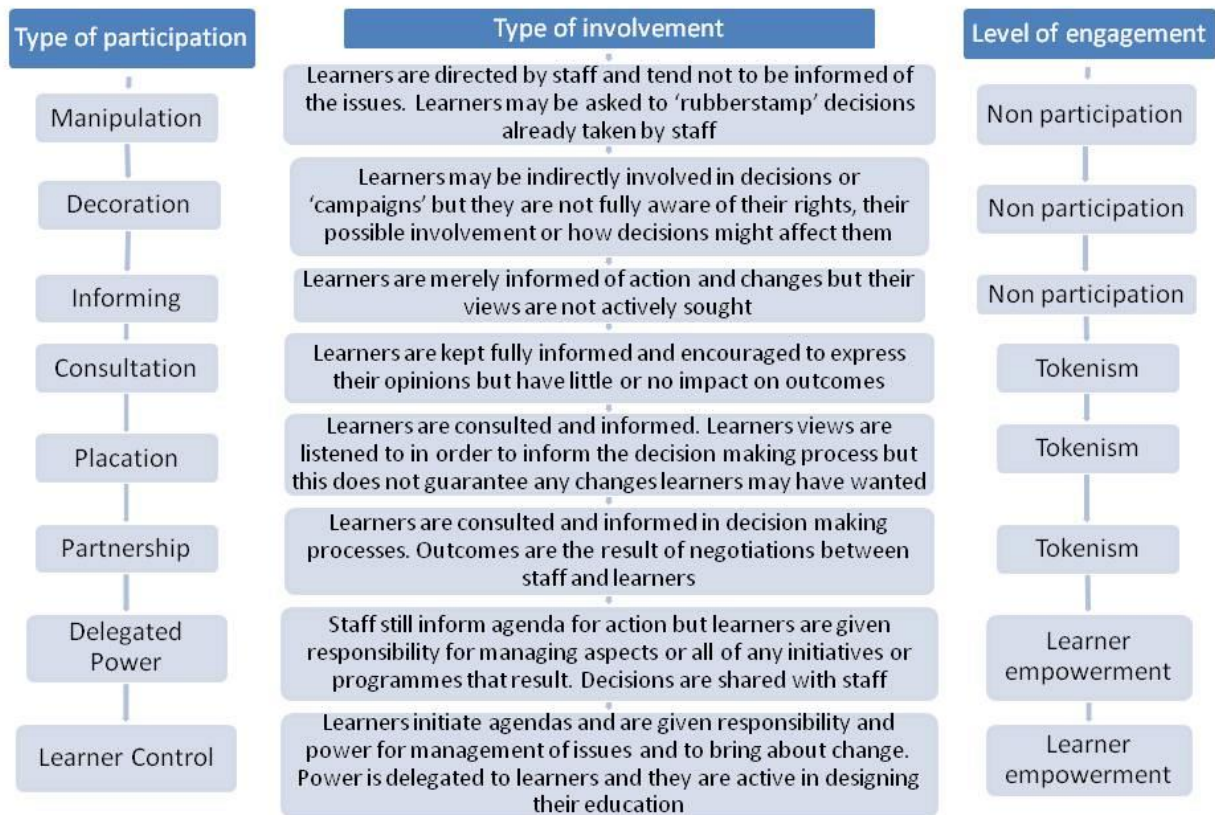


Figure 1: The ladder of participation tool.

Figure 2:

