

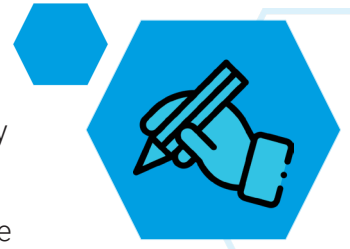


Funding and those who enable it.



I have committed to writing four blogs in August to reflect upon my ten years in the gambling support space. I arrived in this sector by accident, having had an addiction to gambling and a desire to use that lived experience of gambling harms for the public good. Before my addiction, I had a humbling career in the third sector spanning twenty-two years, working at and leading the work of some incredible not-for-profit organisations alongside some dedicated and talented colleagues. I firmly believe that the

third sector has a critical role in developing a better society, whether through the lens of reducing homelessness; obesity; loneliness and social isolation; reoffending; substance or behavioural addictions etc. I have learnt from my longstanding career that the third sector delivers exemplary value for money, is well-connected in local communities and is where innovation and agility can be found by the bucketload to tackle social issues. It is also the third sector where you can find many talented people with lived experience of what most people would consider 'societal issues', where they use their experience to better society. These talented individuals often execute this through establishing organisations, contributions to local and national boards or campaigning. All of this work is driven by great dedication, passion and enthusiasm.



My first blog reflected on how somebody, such as me, with lived experience might go about establishing an organisation. Some people have an overwhelming desire to go on that journey following their recovery, but many have limited experience. That lack of experience can be wholeheartedly learned, but the time to dedicate to learning can take as much focus as establishing the organisation in the first place. It is challenging to set up an organisation, and unless you have walked in the shoes of both (i) an entrepreneur, (ii) with lived experience, how do you truly understand that overwhelming desire some of us have to establish something and that indescribable deep commitment and resolve?

Following my reflections last week, I wanted to dedicate this blog to funding. These are my reflections, observations and the realities of establishing a couple of organisations, specifically in the gambling support space. Additionally, I will reflect on how the space has evolved to embrace those with lived experience and some of the welcome funding innovations. This reflection is structured into two sections (i) how the sector has innovated; (ii) what the future might look like



How the sector has innovated (and those leading that change).

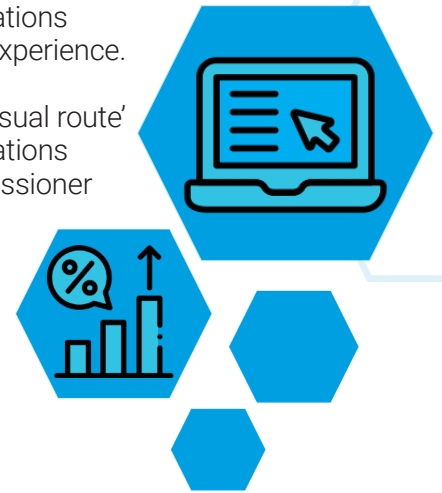
Securing funding to deliver services within the gambling support space remains a challenge. The irony is that it should not be this way, given the financial value of Regulatory Settlements and that licensed gambling operators have consistently stuck to their word and donated annually to the principal commissioner. Over the ten years in this space, I have witnessed the financial value of these annual donations to deliver services increase significantly. Many licensed operators today continue to donate the lion's share of donations to the principal commissioner in this space, and last week, the regulator also made a significant contribution to them via unallocated regulatory settlements, similar to what they did at the onset of Covid. The principle commissioner having a coordinated, multi-agency, strategic approach to minimising gambling related-harm is sensible and something I wholeheartedly support.

You might assume, looking at the news that operators have never made any charitable donations whatsoever. When I started out in this sector, operators were (i) making charitable donations to a wide range of community organisations (disabled, cancer, health organisations etc.), and (ii) the vast majority were also making their annual contributions to the principal commissioner. There are many examples where operators have adopted and continue this philanthropic approach to fundraise for community organisations, in addition to their donations to the principal commissioner. When some suggest gambling operators are manipulating, uncaring or greedy, I do not recognise this at all.





Turning to the regulator, they have done a lot to innovate to enable more organisations to enter this space to provide services, especially those led by people with lived experience. Introducing the published RET list allowed operators to formally (and with some confidence) diversify and widen their annual donations, moving away from 'the usual route' of donating to the principal commissioner. Some operators and support organisations (particularly those led by lived experience) welcomed this as the principal commissioner does not provide grants or welcome ad hoc funding applications (they instead commission services), so how are you to get your support organisation up and running. Additionally, the publication of quarterly operator donations transparently on the regulator's website is also helpful, demonstrating a more accurate reflection of the combined sum of donations (i.e. those to the principal commissioner and those direct to organisations). Working with operators and broader stakeholders, the regulator has done much to innovate around funding, especially considering that they, or gambling operators, are not the principal commissioner in this space.



Next, we turn to the principal commissioner. There are some substantial innovations by funding bodies working with third-sector organisations that I have witnessed over my career. Examples include many funders now offering open-ended online application portals, enabling third-sector organisations to access funding promptly and not wait for specific ITTs to be published; or grants specifically ringfenced to grow lived experience leadership and their organisations; or mentoring, coaching and training being offered alongside grant funding for start-up organisations; or social investment is now typical (at rates lower than mainstream lending) and a way for funders to make a return on their cash assets; and (perhaps the most helpful) unrestricted grant funding opportunities as the market has matured.



I haven't seen much innovation from our principal commissioner over the ten years of working in this space, and I might not be alone in that thinking. I often put myself in their shoes to try and understand how they might see the world or if I am making misjudged assumptions. Our principal commissioner is perceived as 'sitting on' tens of millions in funding, while entrepreneurs, many with lived experience, are in many cases 'self-funding' their organisations to become established and very much 'living day to day' as they grow their organisations. I hope the statutory levy will provide more opportunities to access funding to bolster the number of services and innovations in our sector and that whoever distributes that levy considers ringfencing a proportion of it for (ideally unrestricted) grants. Unrestricted funding is the single most powerful thing that funders can do to support charities and not-for-profit organisations. It enables organisations to be agile and decisive in dealing with the ever-changing demands of the sector while planning as best we can for whatever the future holds. Coordinated, monitored, regular reporting and tied to an overall strategy for the United Kingdom to reduce gambling harms, unrestricted funding would be transformative.

I want to finish this section by stating that no funder has ever attempted to influence their donations (over the past thirty-two years in my career in the third sector). When looking at gambling industry funding and the last ten year specifically, no operator or regulator has attempted to influence their donations. Additionally, what I find interesting is the source of funding to reduce gambling harms will remain consistent post-White Paper, whether this funding flows directly to organisations, or via a regulatory settlement payment, or via the principal commissioner, or via the organisation that will distribute the levy. The gambling industry dominates the ultimate funding source for support services in the United Kingdom, yet some people cannot bring themselves to recognise this or, at best, say thank you. As somebody who has experienced personal sustained attacks on accepting industry donations over the years (regrettably by those with lived experience in the main), I hope the levy will help us focus more on delivering and evaluating quality services and not the funding source.





What the future might look like

Introducing a statutory levy does not change the United Kingdom's funding source for organisations wishing to play their part in reducing gambling harms. A new levy has the potential to be such a powerful enabler for all types of organisations, and my interest in this is how it will support both (i) smaller organisations and (ii) organisations of all sizes, led by leaders with lived experience. So for this section, I have created a wish list as below, and we look forward to contributing to the consultations around the levy, where we'll go into more detail and publish our responses on our website.



Understand the problem:

Identify the impact you seek to achieve from the statutory levy and how both the grantor and grantees will measure and communicate progress transparently.



Mutual, two-way transparent accountability:

for both the organisation distributing funding and the recipients of that funding. Mutual transparency in oversight, external scrutiny and evaluation, value for money and social impact. The grantor and grantee have a mutually balanced relationship.



Strategic approach and published impacts:

Bi-annual progress published for both grantor and grantees and all work pinned to a transparent, published overarching strategy.



Innovation:

the introduction of different ways for grantees to access funding, moving away from exclusively paper-based proposals in responses to Invitation to Tender (ITT)s for commissioned services. Additionally, the introduction of grants and social investment opportunities to broaden the breadth of opportunities for grantees.



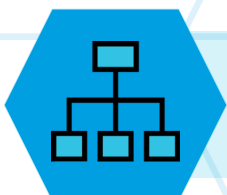
Lived-experience:

Providing purposeful, long-term Learning & Development (L&D) support to enable those with lived experience to establish organisations by offering Degrees or Master qualifications via the apprenticeship levy transfer.



Agility - spend the levy:

a commitment to spend 85% - 90% of the levy annually and not retain money over from previous financial years



Agility - smaller organisations:

consider how smaller or niche organisations can contribute so they are not left behind. .