Advocating the use of open data

Context

Macc is a charity that supports the VCSE sector and local people in Manchester to have more influence over the places and communities where they live. In 2022-23 the charity had an income of £1.6M and 25 employees.

The data journey

The idea of citizen empowerment through open data has appealed to Macc's Chief Executive Mike Wild for about a decade (see his [YouTube video](#)). Macc were becoming inundated with requests for information from their unique dataset about organisations, community groups and volunteers in Manchester City (including from their State of the Sector report), but didn't have the capacity to service such demand.

Mike saw the potential of publishing the data from their CiviCRM database so others could access it and link it to other datasets. Macc worked with the Open Data Collective to structure their data in the right way – for example, using the unique reference codes for each ward from the Office for National Statistics to allow matching with other data. Guidance was produced about how they did this and they openly published [their data and approach](#). The result was a reduction in the number of requests for information as people could now search and explore the data themselves.

Macc also committed to using the standard adopted by 360Giving to allow open publishing and sharing of the grants and funds they administer and were one of the first grant awarding bodies in the country to publish their data. In so doing, they were able to influence other local and national grant giving organisations to share their data openly "if we can do it, why can't you?". This has resulted in more data being published on grants awarded (such as local housing associations) which has helped evidence and influence where funding should be targeted in future.

Enablers: data standards, leadership and tools

Mike understands the potential for open data and other forms of data sharing to help the VCSE sector and has led by example. Macc were supported to publish their data openly by trusted and skilled experts in this space. They also had the tools to help them do so in the form of their CRM, which they are now developing to improve the quality of the data they hold and their metrics. Macc used the [Grantnav](#) tool to search, explore and download grants

data published by UK funders using the 360Giving standard. Agreeing and adopting data standards for a particular purpose facilitates the sharing of data between organisations.

Challenges: resources, strategic approach and skills

Mike has found that the lack of funding for data work in the VCSE sector is a major barrier to progress. There is much demand from the statutory sector for engagement with the VCSE sector, but this isn't usually funded e.g. being asked for directories of different services by the local NHS, local authority's children's support and police. We have the means to use data to connect things up as never before using Open Referral Standards and with investment in the VCSE data and intelligence ecosystem.

"Investment in a data architecture so we can share public information in a planned way. If we all collected data to one standard, it could be shared and unlock community insight and the development of tools and systems. Then we can invest in the capability of our own workforce - but unless there's a commitment to work with it and allow it to mature, we end up in the same conversation again and again."

Macc also struggles with a lack of capacity to analyse and make use of their data as much as they would like. Analytical skills are hard to resource and retain for small VCSE organisations and leadership is key in investing in them. To improve the awareness of leaders about the opportunities data can provide and therefore invest in capacity to make the most of these.

"We need to provide a bite-sized guide on data analysis for leaders. Many of the current generation of VCSE leaders are probably the last who didn't grow up with data as a 'tool', but as a 'task' - it's a generational blind spot. Especially when people are vastly overloaded and struggle to get the bandwidth to take much more on."