

STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAMME 2020–2025

Evaluation report, September 2025

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STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAMME 2020–2025: EVALUATION REPORT, SEPTEMBER 2025

About the Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation is an independent foundation which protects and advances human rights and promotes inclusion. The Foundation's Strengthening Civil Society programme aims to support civil society organisations to embrace the law and human rights based approaches as effective tools for achieving positive change for individuals and communities.

This report was commissioned by the Baring Foundation as part of a review of its Strengthening Civil Society programme in 2025. We are grateful to Jonathan Price and Caroline Rogers of Renaisi for their work on this report.

About Renaisi

Renaisi drives transformative social change with those at the heart of the issue playing a central role. Our mission is to challenge the root causes of social and economic exclusion in order to strengthen communities across the UK. Our model combines social sector evaluation and learning consultancy with expertise in bringing about place-based and systems change. This allows us to understand the embedded nature of many social problems. Collaboration and connection are at the heart of our model, supporting organisations to work in partnership to address priority challenges; and bringing organisations together to use systems change tools in order to design and deliver collaborative interventions.

We are a diverse group of people who bring insight and expertise from our lived and learnt experiences, and our relational approach to working with social change communities enables us to build trust and curate spaces for deep learning. We aim to inspire people and organisations to reimagine a fair society, ensuring that people and organisations have the knowledge, access and power they need to drive transformative change in the places they choose and on the issues that affect them.

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Jonathan Price is a Principal Consultant at Renaisi. He specialises in supporting funders and not-for-profits to use data, analysis and insight – and crucially, conversation and reflection – to achieve their ambitions and maximise the strengths of their people, organisations and collaborations. By using an evaluation and learning ethos rooted in equity and social justice, Jonathan guides organisations to develop new models of evaluating place-based and systems change programmes, supporting a mindset shift in the culture of evaluation and learning. Prior to his work at Renaisi, Jonathan was Grants Manager/ Evaluation Manager at Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and before this a Researcher at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at Oxford University.

Caroline Rogers

Caroline is a Senior Project Manager at Renaisi, with a focus on supporting and evaluating systems change work. Caroline works collaboratively with clients to understand their experience and develop a shared understanding of the context, patterns and challenges they face. As an experienced facilitator, she embraces disagreement in this process as necessary for understanding and growth, particularly in a social change context where progress can often feel messy or unclear. Caroline pairs this with an interest in data and evidence-driven approaches, using external evidence and benchmarking to identify clear signs of impact and progress. She has 10 years' experience working in the social policy sector, both conducting social change work within civil society organisations, and evaluating it as an external consultant.

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Launch of Know Your Rights to Protest Guide, 2025. Courtesy of Public Interest Litigation Support (PILS Project), Northern Ireland.

Summary

The current context faced by civil society organisations delivering legal and human rights work reflects significant challenges. Decades of underfunding, increasing costs and a hostile political environment make it difficult to ensure adequate scrutiny of public decisions, challenge unjust or unfair practice and take a systemic approach to social change. At the same time, organisations are increasingly reliant on legal approaches to securing change as other avenues have become harder to leverage. These difficulties have been worsening over many years and will be familiar reading for many.

The Baring Foundation's Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) programme has aimed to address these challenges over the past ten years by supporting organisations from across civil society to use legal and human rights-based approaches to securing positive social change. The Foundation is now taking a step back to evaluate progress towards its objectives and consider how best to continue to support civil society. This report was commissioned as a part of this process, evaluating the programme's progress towards its objectives and taking stock of the Foundation's position in the sector at this moment in time.

The evaluation used mixed methods: a review of grant monitoring reports, semi-structured interviews and a workshop with grant holders, interviews with Foundation staff and trustees, and representatives of other foundations, and the 360Giving data portal to analyse grant giving trends.

Our research found that the SCS programme achieved success across a number of its objectives:

- civil society organisations have increased understanding of when and how to use the law effectively to tackle discrimination and disadvantage;
- they have built sustainable partnerships supporting this work, particularly between specialist and non-specialist organisations;
- the programme has strengthened sector infrastructure to support use of the law and human rights;
- it has supported connection between frontline advice delivery and advocacy and policy change, which are in turn linked with successful use of legal and human rights approaches.

Much of the successful use of strategic legal approaches is underpinned by a connection to frontline advice and support: a sector that faces existential difficulties. Looking to the future, support for systemic legal approaches should consider how it can simultaneously support and bolster frontline advice.

In addition, while there is a clear body of evidence showing the value of this type of work, there is less evidence that this is leading to increased funding to support it. This creates challenges going forward for the sustainability of civil society organisations and the impact they deliver. Indeed, we found that organisations are precarious and facing significant risks. This work needs to be sustained via long-term and strategic funding commitments, underpinned by a range of funders working in partnership.

The Foundation's approach to grant-making is underpinned by the team's in-depth expertise, continuous learning, a strategy that adapts to the needs of the field, and a light-touch and trust-based approach to relationships with grant holders. The Foundation does not use the language of systems change, unlike many of its peer funders. Despite this, the shape and outcomes of the programme have many characteristics in common with a systems approach. This includes a focus on collaboration, challenging the root causes of issues, and changing narratives.

There are opportunities to build on these attributes through:

- awarding a higher proportion of core funding in the Foundation's grants portfolio to allow for greater flexibility, responsiveness and long-term planning;
- deepening the Foundation's partnership working with grant holders, for example through long-term funding commitments, taking a more proactive role in shaping work and programmes together through co-design and participatory approaches, and sharing some of the 'risks' that many grant holders are facing in a hostile political environment for civil society;
- persevering with efforts to influence the funding ecosystem for legal and human rights work in order to support greater security and sustainability for civil society organisations;
- exploring the benefits of drawing on the tools and frameworks developed in the body of work on systems change to build on Baring's current strategy, without any requirement to adopt its associated language which some may feel can create barriers.

The Foundation provides a unique form of financial and non-financial support to the sector. Given the challenges faced by grant holders to find suitable additional funding to sustain or grow their legal and human rights work in the UK, there are no concerns of oversaturation in the funding landscape. Trends in this landscape are frustrating for grant holders. Financial issues are leading to organisations and individuals leaving the sector and strategic opportunities for change are left unaddressed because of a lack of funding to pursue them.

There are concerns within the Foundation team about the existence of thematic 'gaps' in the sector. The Foundation may be well placed to fill such gaps, particularly in cases where the team holds relevant knowledge and expertise. However, it will be important to do so in a way that builds on the programme's success in supporting organic work and 'funding the best, whatever it is'.

Evidence from this evaluation suggests there is merit in deepening the Foundation's current strategy, rather than a significant shift in focus, and we recommend that any decision to pivot to alternative thematic areas be made in conjunction with a wider body of evidence. Where there is less evidence of success – namely, broadening the funding landscape – we recommend changing tactics rather than the goal itself and building on the success of the programme to encourage a broader range of funders to play a role in supporting legal and human rights-based approaches.

Introduction

The current context faced by civil society organisations reflects a number of significant challenges. Decades of underfunding, increasing costs and a hostile political environment make it difficult to ensure adequate scrutiny of public decisions, challenge unjust or unfair practice and take a systemic approach to social change. At the same time, organisations are increasingly reliant on legal approaches to securing change as other avenues have become harder to effectively leverage. These difficulties have been growing and developing over many years and will be familiar reading for many.

The Baring Foundation's Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) programme has aimed to bridge this gap over the past ten years, supporting organisations to use legal and human rights based approaches as part of wider movements for social change. As the programme comes to the end of its ten years of delivery, the Foundation is taking a step back to evaluate progress towards its objectives and consider how to best continue to support civil society. This report was commissioned as a part of this process, to evaluate the programme's progress towards its objectives and take stock of the Foundation's position in the sector at this moment in time.

BACKGROUND TO THE STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAMME

The Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) Programme is a 10-year funding programme delivered by the Baring Foundation between 2015 and 2025. It provides funding for organisations to use the law and human-rights based approaches in their work, with the

ultimate aim of supporting increased use of the law to challenge discrimination and disadvantage through changes in policy, regulation and law; changes in behaviours, attitudes and norms and through new ways of designing or delivering services and support for individuals.

The programme's five core objectives contribute to its overarching aim, and are to:

1. understand when, how and where the law or human rights-based approaches can be effective tools to directly tackle discrimination and disadvantage and safeguard the freedom of purpose, action and voice of civil society organisations;
2. build sustainable collaborations and partnerships between organisations that leverage existing expertise within the sector to use the law and human rights-based approaches;
3. develop additional capacity to use the law and human rights within broader movements for social change;
4. translate frontline activity into effective advocacy and policy change; and
5. create the evidence base to support new streams of funding for this activity.

In addition to the provision of financial resources through the SCS programme, the Foundation's approach to grant-making includes a range of non-financial support and guidance. A theory of change developed at the start of this evaluation (pictured below) represents how the activities and approach of the Foundation are intended to meet its objectives and overarching aim.

Strengthening Civil Society's strategy, activities and processes

THEMATIC FOCUS AREAS	FUNDING STRATEGY	WAYS OF WORKING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Safeguarding access to public law ▪ Supporting work across the UK ▪ Developing collective leadership ▪ Tackling racial injustice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Funding policy and research work ▪ Supporting legal and non-legal organisations to work together to challenge injustice ▪ Supporting training, education and capacity building ▪ Convening and knowledge promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supportive and engaged grantmaking ▪ Working flexibly and responsively ▪ Convening organisations ▪ Partnering and collaborating with other funders ▪ Mix of open and closed processes ▪ Prioritising longer term projects rooted in relationships



Outcomes and impacts for civil society

OUTCOMES	OVERALL PROGRAMME IMPACT
<p>Voluntary sector organisations...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have increased understanding of when, how and where the law/human rights based approaches can be used to tackle discrimination and disadvantage, and safeguard the voluntary sector ▪ Have increased capacity for using the law and human rights based approaches to further their goals as part of movements for social change ▪ Can translate frontline activity into effective advocacy and policy change activities ▪ Form sustainable partnerships with legal hub organisations ▪ Build an evidence base that can support them to leverage new streams of funding for this work 	<p>Increased use of the law to challenge discrimination and disadvantage that leads to social change through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Changes in policy, regulation and law ▪ Changes in behaviour, attitudes and norms ▪ New ways of designing or delivering services and support for individuals

Figure 1: Our draft theory of change for the Strengthening Civil Society programme (drafted by Renaisi as part of this evaluation).

PURPOSE OF THIS EVALUATION

In 2020, the Baring Foundation commissioned an evaluation of the Strengthening Civil Society programme to reflect on progress and learning during the first five years of delivery. The evaluation had a significant impact on the shape and direction of the programme in its second five-year phase (2020 – 2025). As the programme approaches the ten-year mark, the Baring Foundation commissioned this second evaluation to understand progress towards the programme objectives during 2020 – 2025, and to inform decisions about the next steps of their work in this area.

Our evaluation addresses three questions:

- 1. Is the Foundation meeting the objectives it set out for the Strengthening Civil Society programme?**
- 2. How has the Foundation's approach to grant-making (including processes, programme structure and convening) contributed towards strengthening civil society?**
- 3. Where does the Foundation fit in, in relation to the rest of the funding sector, given its niche focus?**

Methodology

THE EVALUATION METHODOLOGY WAS DIVIDED INTO FOUR MAIN PHASES, BEGINNING WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK, THEN FOCUSING ON ONE OF THE THREE EVALUATION QUESTIONS IN EACH OF THE SUBSEQUENT THREE PHASES.

PHASES

Figure 2 below outlines our approach to answering these three questions.

EVIDENCE SOURCES

Figure 3 summarises the evidence sources we used to answer each of the three research questions.

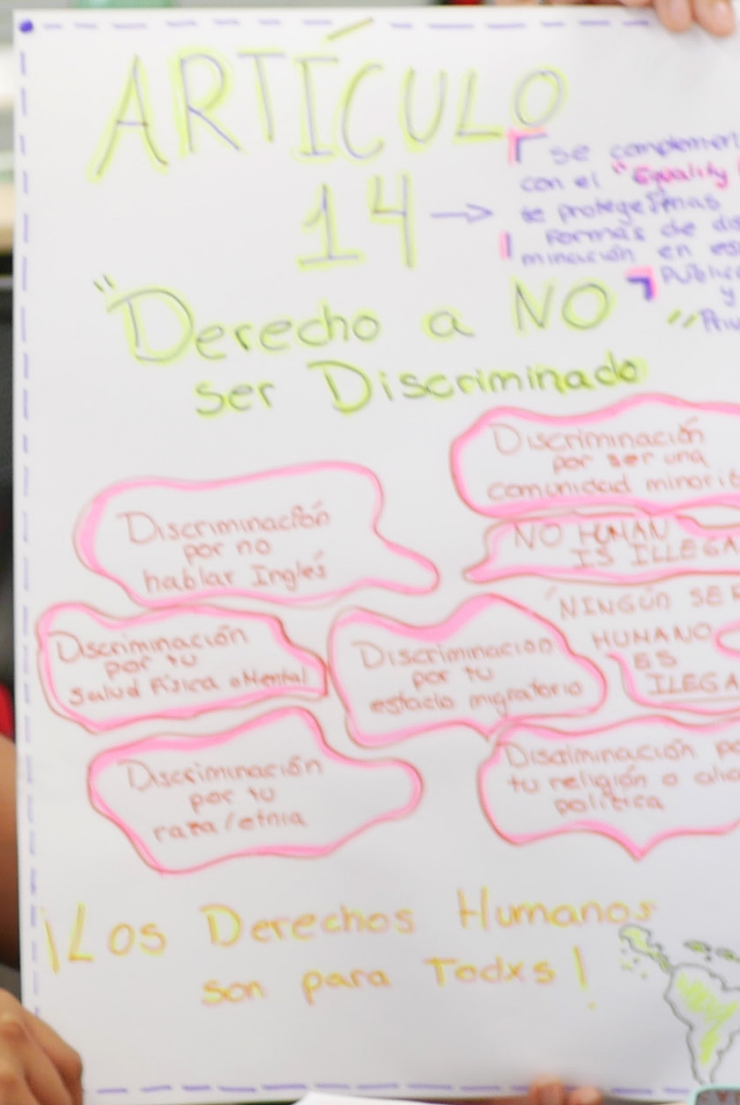
Figure 2: Methodology phases

PHASE	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	TIMELINE
1. KICK-OFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Inception meetingInternal document review	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Project inception document	December
2. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Document deep diveDesign evaluation framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Evaluation frameworkSummary slide deck of key findings	Jan-Feb
3. ASSESSING PROGRESS TOWARDS OUTCOMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Analyse monitoring reportsInterview grantholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Summary slide deck of key findings	Feb-March
4. THE FOUNDATION'S POSITION WITHIN THE SECTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Desk review and interviews with key stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Summary slide deck of key findings	April
5. THE FOUNDATION'S APPROACH TO GRANT-MAKING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Collaborative analysis and co-design sessions		May
6. REPORTING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reporting on findingsPresenting findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Final reportShort blog	June-Aug

Figure 3: Evidence sources (see full questions on page 9)

Question 1: Objectives Question 2: Approach & contribution Question 3: Position in sector	Q1	Q2	Q3
Analysis of 53 grant monitoring reports: Our sampling strategy was designed to ensure a broad spread across grant size and years administered. Note that grant reports for grants made in 2024 were not yet available and so could not be included in our evaluation. To account for this, we included more recent grant holders in our sampling for qualitative interviews.	●	●	
Six grant-holder interviews: We interviewed six grant holding organisations who could each meet at least one of the following criteria (these were informed by the SCS programme objectives): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An explicit remit around research and fundraising ▪ An explicit focus on partnerships/collaboration ▪ Achievement of legal impacts ▪ Achievement of advocacy/policy impacts ▪ A place-based, community focus ▪ A focus on delivering training Across the sample, we spoke with three infrastructure/'hub' organisations, one each from Scotland and Northern Ireland, and at least one organisation funded through the programme's racial justice fund. We included organisations delivering sector infrastructure functions, who have a bird's eye view of issues and trends across the field. The organisation meeting the above criteria and working in Wales did not respond to our request for interview; however their report was charted. Interviews with grant holders focused on their funded work, their relationship with the Foundation and their perspective on the current context for civil society in relation to funding for legal and human rights-based approaches for social change.	●	●	●
Interviews with three Foundation staff members, two trustees, two staff of other foundations and the SCS programme's learning partner: These interviews covered their perspectives on the programme's work, how the Foundation approaches grant-making and their perspectives on the current and future context for the sector.		●	●
Co-analysis session with nine grant holder participants: In this session, we discussed our emerging findings and analysis in relation to the Fund's progress towards its objectives, and the Foundation's approach to grant-making. We created space for grant holders to critically engage with these emerging findings, and suggest nuances and refinements to the analysis. Five attendees had participated in evaluation interviews, and four further grant holders attended to share their perspectives on the emerging findings and analysis.			

Question 1: Objectives Question 2: Approach & contribution Question 3: Position in sector	Q1	Q2	Q3
Analysis of 360 Giving grant data: To build our understanding of the Foundation's position within a wider field of funders in the legal and human rights space.			●
Analysis of 5 funding strategies of the Foundation's peer funders: AB Charitable Trust, Access to Justice Foundation, The Legal Education Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Trust for London.			●



Progress towards Strengthening Civil Society programme objectives

**IN THIS SECTION, WE ADDRESS THE EVALUATION QUESTION:
IS THE FOUNDATION MEETING THE OBJECTIVES IT SET OUT FOR
THE STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAMME?**

INCREASED UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF LEGAL APPROACHES

The Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) programme programme increased organisations' understanding and awareness of the different legal tools at their disposal, how to use them effectively and the benefits and risks associated with each. Grant holders learnt about these tools through training and practical implementation, often via collaborations between specialist and non-specialist legal organisations. They disseminated these skills to a wide range of civil society organisations through collaboration, training and convening.

Grant holders used a range of legal tools and approaches, from complaints and data analysis to litigation, to achieve positive impact in different domains, from case law to policy implementation and public understanding. Often these approaches are used in conjunction with each other.

While many grant holders were prepared to use judicial review, in many cases this was not considered the most effective or appropriate avenue. Instead, grant holders broadened their approach, using diverse and creative ways to secure their desired impact.

Sector impact was achieved in many different ways, including: wins in court, changes to policy or practice, improved outcomes for individual clients, improved social awareness of issues and campaign successes. In many cases, the threat of legal action was sufficient to produce policy change without the grant holder needing to pursue a full legal case through to conclusion. In others, the intransigency of the government compelled full legal action and in such cases, final outcomes tend to take longer to fully emerge (many grant holder cases are still in progress). As a result, the impact of the programme will not be fully evident until these legal cases are concluded and their rulings subsequently implemented.

In many cases, increased understanding of legal tools was accompanied by a growth in organisations' self-awareness of their unique position and strengths within a wider ecosystem of organisations. Grant holders also learnt valuable lessons about when using the law for social change may not be the most appropriate or effective avenue.

Figure 4: Legal tools identified during this evaluation

CATEGORY	LEGAL TOOLS USED
Knowledge production and exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expert legal advice to understand merits and risks of an approach ▪ Producing and disseminating research to support legal cases ▪ Sharing learning with other organisations ▪ Briefings to explain changes in legislation
Legal education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public legal education such as ‘know your rights’ training ▪ Training and workshops to support organisations’ understanding of legal tools and confidence using them ▪ Ongoing or ad-hoc expert support for organisations who are using the law in their work
Legal action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conducting individual casework using the law, or systemic or thematic legal challenges using: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elements of judicial review, such as Pre Action Protocol letters, complaints and threats of judicial review • Legal challenges based on human rights, discrimination, planning, environmental, employment and data protection legislation • Supporting individuals to feel confident accessing and asserting rights to services, support and fairer treatment. ▪ Making formal complaints e.g. super complaints. ▪ Wraparound activities, e.g. communications or policy work to support and enable legal action.
Compliance and implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensuring effective implementation of legal judgments ▪ Ensuring compliance with legal judgments ▪ Supporting organisations to understand and communicate the implications of legal judgments

There are some factors that consistently emerge among these lessons:

The welfare of the individuals involved:

Many forms of legal action will require finding an individual case or person with standing to represent a wider issue. It is important to consider whether or not people are likely to be in a good position to take on this role, particularly if there is fear of backlash from authority figures or the person has immediate issues that need resolving first.

The nature of the change you are looking to achieve and the barriers to achieving it:

If the desired change is an alteration of law, a legal approach is sensible. However, changes to policy or practice can often be achieved via different means, e.g. relationship building, collective problem solving and negotiation, and broader campaigning tactics, often in conjunction with legal arguments.

Finances and the ability to see a case through over time:

Legal action is costly and time consuming. Many grassroots organisations do not have the finances, or appetite for risk, that taking on a large legal case can entail.

The broader narrative around an issue:

While legal arguments are important, so are the broader narrative frames that exist around an issue. If the prevailing narrative is not supportive of your argument, you will need to consider how to shift this alongside conducting legal action.

Specifics of the case:

Every case and every context will present different risks and potential benefits. When weighing up whether or not a legal approach is likely to make sense, there is no substitute for seeking expert legal advice.

One key lesson noted by grant holders was that their perception of litigation in general has shifted. Rather than viewing it as a standalone mechanism, they are now likely to see it as part of a wider toolbox of tactics. Winning the case is positive, but in order for it to translate to a wider systemic shift, organisations need to accompany legal action with an effective communications strategy, and work to ensure implementation and ongoing compliance.

“Dedicating time to legacy work is essential – a case can have significant impact whether you win or lose – it is important to make the most of the opportunity to gather support for change through legislation, or simply to let people know about the issue to help future challenges.”

Grant monitoring report

We found that many grant holders shared these learnings with wider civil society, both through spaces convened by the Foundation and across their own networks.

One of the key features of the SCS Programme is supporting a specialist legal organisation working with non-specialist legal organisations to help them develop confidence and a deeper understanding of legal approaches. While one-off trainings are effective for upskilling organisations in discrete ways, organisations tend to most effectively develop their own foundations of knowledge when this support is based in a long-term relationship.

“As we've built that relationship, they've also massively built their knowledge of the law, and so now, rather than sometimes us having to even recognise a challenge, they might actually tell us, Look, this is happening. I mean, they might still ask us the question, but they're actually very good now recognising, like, how to spot challenges with others.”

Grant holder interviewee

Many grant holders also provided public legal education training for individuals, such as 'know your rights' sessions. Grant holders noted that this increase in knowledge and skills had improved advocacy outcomes and increased individuals' confidence in asserting their rights.

“Many people were simply told, “there is no money so we will stop your social care support” and felt that there was nothing they could do. We are helping through public legal education... to raise awareness of people's legal and human rights, demonstrating that despite the financial crisis, social care rights are still enforceable.”

Grant monitoring report

It is more difficult for them to clearly evidence or evaluate the shift in individuals' understanding they have supported, due to limited capacity both on the part of grant holders and those they have worked with. However, we can infer increased understanding of legal approaches through evidence of their increased use in practice.

We have identified three key learnings in relation to supporting individuals and grassroots community organisations to increase their understanding of legal approaches through education and training.

1. Individual capacity for learning and development is a key challenge.

While people may be interested, they are not always able to participate in programmes due to other priorities and changing circumstances. In addition, participating in a capacity-building programme means having the time and bandwidth for long-term, strategic

thinking. This can be difficult to find for those working in a sector that faces significant structural challenges.

2. Increased understanding of legal tools needs to be approached holistically.

Acknowledging the importance of effective implementation and supporting organisations to understand this part of the process too.

3. Recurring capacity building

Due to significant turnover of staff in community-based organisations, there needs to be recurring capacity building over time to ensure organisational and sector-level memory.

SUSTAINING SECTOR INFRASTRUCTURE

The SCS Programme played a key role in building and sustaining sector infrastructure, which contributes to strengthening civil society. By sector infrastructure, we are referring to organisations that create an enabling environment for civil society via a range of functions such as capacity building, influencing, thought leadership, networking and alliance building.

Such organisations play an important role in creating the conditions necessary to sustain systems change, by deepening relationships, increasing knowledge and building networks that other organisations, coalitions and initiatives can build on. Their work often has ripple effects for other civil society organisations in terms of their knowledge, understanding and ability to use the law.

Through this work building and sustaining sector infrastructure, the SCS Programme has increased the capacity of civil society organisations to use the law as part of broader movements for social change. Examples of this increased capacity include:

- Producing toolkits, templates, newsletters and information packs to support civil society organisations in using legal and human-rights-based approaches
- Developing networks, forums, meetings and online spaces for organisations to come together, share experiences, get support and ask questions about using legal approaches in their work

- Capacity-building work based in trainings and long-term relationships, which we discuss in more detail above.

These activities helped make legal approaches more accessible to grassroots organisations at all levels – from providing basic information and advice, to creating peer support networking spaces, to linking grassroots organisations with specialist support.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING AND COLLABORATION

Collaboration was a vital ingredient of most of the effective legal action identified in this evaluation. Often this took the form of a collaboration between specialist legal organisations and campaigning or community support organisations.

In some cases, collaboration was tactical, and time-limited, often between a small number of organisations. In others these were longer term, movement-wide coalitions. The length and substance of a collaboration is generally influenced by the requirements of a particular case or campaign, the strategies of the organisations in question, and the extent to which there is deeper strategic alignment between the goals of the collaborators.

“Generally, the partnerships are around a specific thing we’re trying to achieve or specific case.”

“For us, it’s part of building movements, social movements, and we are part of that. We want to be a part of that.”

Grant holder interviewees

Collaborative work is generally built on relationships and building these takes time and capacity. Convening, including the Baring Foundation residencies, as well as conferences or regular communities of practice, provided organisations with opportunities to build such relationships and learn from one another. In other cases, time limited collaborations and ad-hoc support provides the conditions for longer-term relationships to develop.

Often these relationships are built speculatively, with an eye to supporting with future litigation should the 'right case' surface. The long-term rewards of relationship building are not always felt in the short-term and collaboration is often an investment for the future possibility of legal action.

“ We have been quite cautious in terms of the number of relationships that we make, because for them to be meaningful, you can't offer it to everybody, because otherwise we would spread ourselves too thin and couldn't, couldn't do it. ”

Grant holder interviewee

Grant holders saw value in the complementary tactics and increased knowledge that comes with collaboration between organisations that bring different skills and were generally keen to invest in relationships and sustain this approach. At the same time, they know that the success of their collaborations rests on the wider health and stability of civil society organisations, since collaboration needs to be resourced, including with sufficient resource for sector infrastructure that supports it.

“ Lots of different people with different perspectives. I think it makes your political argument stronger. I think it makes it more fun. I think it creates opportunities. Or it creates opportunities in the sense that some of these groups, like have such great subject matter expertise about something that we don't really know about. ”

Grant holder interviewee

Many grant holders acknowledged the complex power dynamics that can emerge through collaboration, particularly when groups hold differing levels of resources, knowledge and structural power. It can also be difficult to navigate competing organisational priorities or strategies, particularly in cases where

some organisations receive public funding and have nervousness around potential retaliation from power holders. However, on the whole, grant holders felt equipped to navigate these dynamics, providing they could see overall alignment between the missions of respective collaborators.

“ With quite a lot of the smaller groups, we've really had to do the heavy lifting on the fundraising. But that hasn't really been difficult. It's just been like a dynamic, I think, to be slightly more aware of. ”

“ You know people are coming together to campaign, say, against demolition of their estate. They might have very different interests. You might have Council tenants, you might have lease holders, you might have people in temporary accommodation. They all have different interests, different understanding of what's possible, want different outcomes, and also, like, you know, like, yeah, community campaigning is not like, is not neat, you know, there's no like, formal structure. ”

Grant holder interviewees

We found instances of strong collaboration between organisations delivering frontline advice and those doing strategic legal work, for example where casework data informs strategic legal work, or where individuals receiving advice become involved in campaigning. Indeed, organisations delivering strategic legal work are dependent on individual cases identified by frontline organisations that have the potential to create systemic change through changes in the law. Throughout this process it remains imperative that individuals' personal goals and needs are prioritised and addressed before strategic legal action is taken.

As such, the significant structural challenges faced by frontline advice and support organisations will have a knock-on effect for organisations who look to use the law for social change.

LEGAL APPROACHES AS PART OF BROADER TACTICS

We have observed that strategies for achieving change tend to be most effective when several approaches are used in tandem – for example, combining legal approaches with advocacy and campaigning activities, or having a media and communications campaign alongside a legal case.

Using complementary tactics to achieve change often requires organisations to organise and collaborate, using respective strengths. Grant holders have used report launches, written policy briefings and milestone moments such as anniversaries to bring civil society together (either virtually or physically) and mobilise around a specific issue. Such events help to inform civil society organisations of the broader context of their work and can create the starting points of collaborative relationships.

Evidence that grant holders are increasingly working in this way suggests that, alongside the delivery of legal advice, they are thinking more broadly about how they can change systems. This means on one level they are shifting structures (policies, practices) while also considering how to change mindsets, how to frame issues, and how to speak to wider audiences. Campaigning and communications strategies are key here in influencing the underlying narratives that sustain the change organisations want to see.

As such, influencing and campaigning tactics are considered an essential component of using legal approaches to achieve change. They represent specific skills that many organisations have developed and deepened during the grant period.

In many cases, grant holders successfully paired ‘inside track’ influencing with ‘outside track’ litigation to put pressure on government to make progress. There have been wins in the form of policy concessions, secured after long-term engagement with policymakers and an external communications strategy, followed by a tactical ‘threat’ of legal action. This is a delicate balance – organisations need a strong understanding of routes to change to know how and when to deploy different tactics.

Policy influencing tactics are often seen as less adversarial, and more relational, than legal action. Many perceive these tactics as offering a less combative way to push for improved safeguards or increased scrutiny of rights, as they require a more overt level of collaboration and compromising with decision-makers.

“It’s not so much that you’re combating and you’re fighting the authority. You’re fighting this. You’re creating a sense that we’re working together, and you’re building alliances, and your voice comes together, and you build on each other’s experiences, and you value the other organisations, and you come together with that shared understanding of a problem.”

“The thing as well that we’ve had with professional organisations, that they’re working on that policy, through the policy route with the government department, and then they’re like, ‘Yeah, we can’t litigate’, or ‘we need to wait, because we’re really trying to get this’, and then two years later, they’re still talking to civil servants, and it’s gone nowhere..”

Grant holder interviewee

However, these routes do not always enable organisations to make progress if decision-makers are intransigent or if there are multiple barriers to the desired solution. In these instances, legal action can be used to force public authorities into action. If a legal or policy change is secured, ongoing influencing and advocacy is needed to challenge poor implementation, which grant holders cited as a key issue.

GROWING AND SCALING

The SCS programme has been instrumental in supporting organisations to grow, expand and work in new ways, thereby strengthening civil society. Baring’s funding enabled many organisations and projects to scale their work, expand into new areas, develop new skills, develop new collaborations or spin out into independent organisations. In other cases, it supported organisations to weather challenges and emerge stronger.

“I must say that they stepped up and supported us through these difficult times. And yeah, we very much rose from the ashes. And really, kind of like, went from like, strength to strength after that.”

Grant holder interviewee

Growth comes with some challenges. When expanding into new ways of working, outcomes can feel uncertain and take a long time to emerge. Many grant holders observed that their goals or intentions had shifted during the course of the grant, as they reacted to new information or contexts. As such, it is important for the Foundation and grant holders to have a shared appetite for risk, and a foundation of mutual trust that allows for flexibility in how grant funding is spent. For the most part, grant holders felt the Foundation provided this flexibility.

Grant holders expressed concerns about how growth can be sustained given the precarity of the field, and the prevalence of small pots of short-term funding. While much of the Foundation's funding has supported growth and scaling, this comes with risk of 'cliff edge' scenarios, whereby grant holders struggle to embed practices and achieve sustainability within the timescale of the grant. Such projects risk raising expectations and creating a significant problem at the end of a grant if activity levels cannot be sustained.

ADDRESSING THREATS TO THE FREEDOMS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Between 2020 and 2025, civil society faced a number of threats to their voice and purpose.

The most prominent threats identified from our research include:

- during the pandemic, there were fewer opportunities to scrutinise legislative changes given the 'extraordinary' circumstances faced, and an increase in legislation that impacted on rights and duties;
- there were also political and legal difficulties due to the vulnerability of the Human Rights Act, planned changes to judicial review and political critiques of the role of the judiciary;

- many CSOs experienced increasingly stretched capacity due to rising demand and costs, staff burnout and exiting the sector, and decreasing available funding;
- in hand with this, organisations note increasing difficulties in upholding legal rights due to decreasing societal expectations of public bodies.

Organisations tried to meet these threats through thinking creatively about resourcing, working closely together and adopting more diverse tactics for achieving change. The SCS programme has supported these efforts through supporting sector infrastructure and providing space for organisations to learn, try new approaches and scale up successful ones. In addition, Baring Foundation residentials created a space where grassroots organisations could connect with specialists who could help them navigate some of the threats they faced.

For many funded organisations, support from the SCS programme was instrumental in supporting them to navigate challenging times that may have otherwise overwhelmed them. At the same time, the grant holders we interviewed continue to face financial and political pressures that present a serious threat to their continued freedom of voice and purpose. These challenges include a contraction of public funding for legal and human rights work, hostility to civil society, a targeting of organisations (particularly those considered to be activist) by newspapers, politicians and regulators, rising costs and increasing requests for support from marginalised communities.

Neither the new Labour government or civil society is turning the tide on this trajectory. In Scotland the context is somewhat less stark, with civil society generally finding it easier to make change happen due to size and relative proximity to decision-makers.

Many grant holders are struggling to muster the practical and emotional resilience required to address these challenges. In a context where organisational resilience is so thin, taking risks becomes more and more difficult. That makes it harder in turn to challenging forms of injustice which have been normalised or so far unquestioned.

“The next challenge that goes with that is, how do we stand up to the absolute nonsense that’s happening right now, to right wing populism, stand up to ‘economic growth at all costs’, stand up to ‘deregulation because there’s too many bats’, you know. I mean, how? How do we, how do we tackle that? And I think that’s a conversation that all of us need to be thinking about really hard this year.”

Grant holder interviewee

Civil society is looking for funders to stand with them in solidarity, sharing risk and using their power to combat this hostile context alongside supporting with the financial challenges they face.

FINANCIAL PRECARITY IN A HOSTILE CONTEXT

The external economic and political context is increasing the financial vulnerability and precarity felt by many organisations. Grant holders are particularly concerned about the paucity of available funding for legal and human rights work.

“If we’re bold enough to take this step forward, who’s there to hold us and who’s there to support us?”

Grant holder interviewee

The Foundation’s funding has created opportunities for voluntary sector organisations to expand into new areas of work, test out new approaches and learn from them, and highlight their achievements to other funders. However, despite examples of organisations successfully secured funding from other sources to continue and scale their work, the field remains reliant on a relatively small pool of funders. This evaluation found relatively weak evidence for the programme’s impact on leveraging further sources of funding for this work, creating challenges for sustaining it going forward.

During interviews, grant holders observed how increasingly precarious they feel and the difficulties they face in accessing funding for ongoing work. It can be difficult to make a case for sustaining core work, when this does not feel innovative or new and is unlikely to result in media attention or a single, significant ‘win’.

“Grant funders tell us they are overwhelmed with applications and many funders are closing their doors and redistributing their assets.”

“It’s been hard for an organisation like ours to evidence the need for us ... because quite often, we don’t have to use the law in the way that perhaps lots of other more sexy organisations can do, like, you know, taking people to court all the time, you know, judicial reviews all the time... a lot of the time it’s basic information. It’s just making people aware of their rights.”

Grant holder interviewees

This was particularly felt by second-tier infrastructure organisations. Such organisations play an important role in creating the conditions necessary for systems change, by building deep relationships, knowledge and networks that others can leverage. Partnership working is attractive to many funders, and there is some evidence that funders are seeing the value of funding work using legal approaches. However, this does not always translate into funding for sustaining the infrastructure required for this to take place and many second-tier organisations are struggling to diversify their funding.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

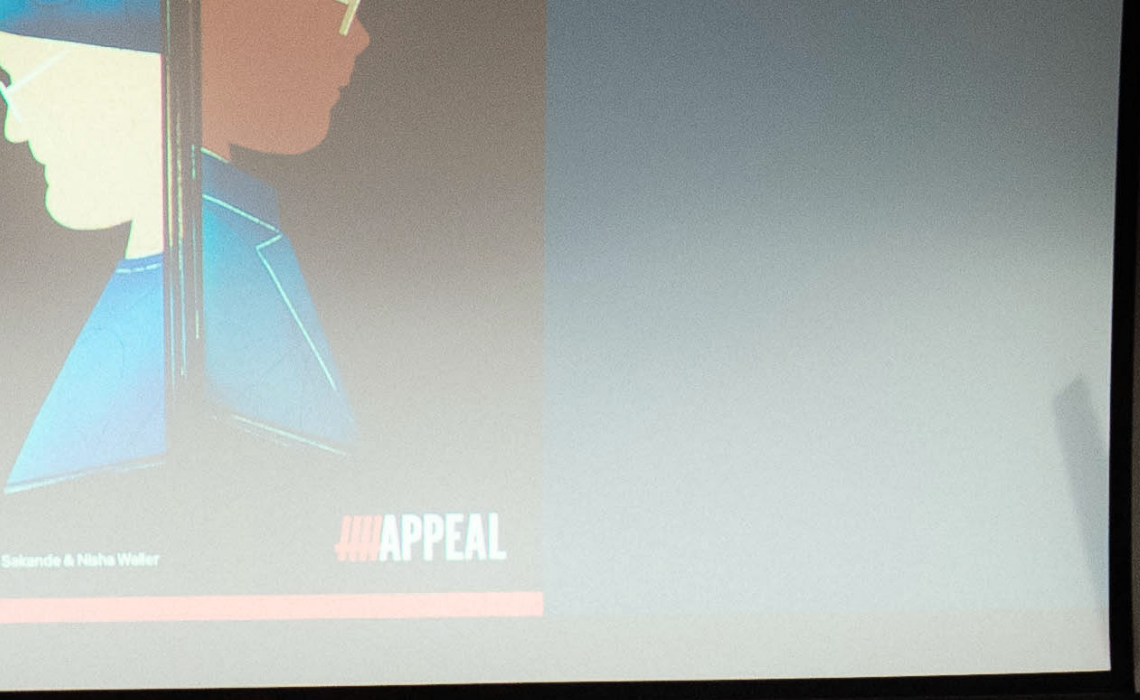
The SCS programme achieved success across a number of its objectives:

- civil society organisations have an increased understanding of when, how and where the law can be used effectively to tackle discrimination and disadvantage;

- they have built sustainable partnerships supporting use of the law for social change, particularly between specialist and non-specialist organisations;
- the programme has strengthened sector infrastructure to support use of the law and human rights;
- it has supported connection between frontline advice delivery and advocacy and policy change, which are in turn linked with successful use of legal approaches.

There are some areas where our evaluation has found a more complex picture:

- much of the successful use of strategic legal approaches is underpinned by a connection to frontline advice and support: a sector that faces existential difficulties. This raises questions around how support for systemic legal approaches can simultaneously support and bolster frontline advice;
- while there is a clear body of evidence showing the value of this type of work, there is less evidence that this is leading to increased sources of funding to support it, raising questions about what more the Foundation can do to support the ecosystem of funding for this work.



Launch of APPEAL's report,
*Doubt dismissed: race, juries
and wrongful conviction*, 2024.
Photo ©Callaway Hoven.



Understanding the Foundation's approach to grant-making

IN THIS SECTION, WE ADDRESS THE EVALUATION QUESTION: HOW HAS BARING'S APPROACH TO GRANT-MAKING (INCLUDING PROCESSES, PROGRAMME STRUCTURE AND CONVENING) CONTRIBUTED TOWARDS STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY?

Firstly, we identified the core elements of the Foundation's approach to grant-making, through analysing internal documents and consulting with Foundation staff, and identified the following seven areas. Some of these were explicitly described in documents or conversations with staff, and some emerged through our analysis of working approaches and patterns.

Supportive and engaged grant-making:

Working thoughtfully, with a relational approach. Adding value through networking, signposting, research and policy development and dissemination.

Partnership and collaborative working:

Working closely with other funders to understand and increase the ecosystem supporting this work, e.g. by partnering with funders and contributing to 'pooled' funds.

Convening organisations:

Creating space for grant holders to come together, learn, and grow both individually and collectively through learning partnerships and communities of practice.

Flexibility and responsiveness:

Responding flexibly to grant holders' needs, and responding to successes and challenges

Prioritising medium term projects rooted in relationships:

Collaboration and social change take time. To ensure space is created for relationships to form, open grant-making focused on three-year developmental projects.

Funding strategically:

Funding strategically as well as responsively. This means holding four strategic aims in mind: protecting and promoting access to public law, fighting racial injustice in the criminal justice system, developing collective leadership and supporting work across the UK.

Mix of open and closed grant processes:

Flexing grant structures to support new organisations and those known to the Foundation.

Using the Foundation's voice:

Undertaking influencing activities as a funder on issues that are key for grant holders' work, either to influence policy or the public debate where appropriate.

These provided an initial framework for exploring the Foundation's approach to grant-making during the data collection phases of this project. Our learning helped us refine our understanding of the Foundation's approach and to identify seven refined elements, which are addressed in the sub-sections below.

EXPERTISE, CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND STRATEGY DESIGN

Grant holder and external interviewees spoke highly of the expertise of Foundation staff. The team has a broad and complementary skillset, and an understanding of the policy and sector context affecting grant holders' work. This has helped the organisation retain a strategic focus that addresses the right issues at the right time for the legal and human rights sector.

The Foundation team values healthy challenge and a culture of debate which helps to challenge assumptions, strengthen their sectoral analysis and provide ongoing momentum for their strategy. The strategy was felt to meet an important gap in the field, owing to the Foundation's understanding of the sector's needs and opportunities in the current context. They have a cautious approach to adopting sector and funder trends, or relying on particular frameworks or ways of thinking. For example, their approach has much in common with that of 'systems change', as it acknowledges the importance of building a programme around relationships and infrastructure. However, the language of 'systems change' is not used.

Several interviewees noted that the Foundation takes a learning approach to their work. Insights from its grant-making ensure the Foundation's analysis of the context is up-to-date, to then be able to inform strategy and programme design to meet the emerging needs of the field, in a continuous cycle. Some grant holder and external interviewees were interested in whether the Foundation's 'culture of debate' could be extended to a wider pool of partners or stakeholders, for example to include grant holders or affected communities through consultation or co-production – as part of the process of informing the Foundation's strategy.

FLEXIBILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS

This approach of continuous learning and adaptation is closely connected to Baring's flexibility and responsiveness as a grant-maker. The Foundation's team understand the nuanced, changeable context in which they work, and so can support grant holders to adapt to this. This is despite the majority of

grants being project-focused, a grant format typically used for goal-oriented initiatives with pre-defined activities, deliverables and outcomes. Such flexibility is key for grant holders who are working in new ways, in a changing environment, and need space within grants to pivot.

A number of interviewees underlined the importance of core funding for allowing organisations to respond to external shifts in context. The Foundation could consider deepening their flexible and responsive approach by awarding a higher proportion of core funding in their grants portfolio. The assessment process for core grants could be based on identifying alignment between the Foundation and the applicant in terms of their goals/ambition, values and strategy for achieving social change.

LIGHT TOUCH AND TRUST-BASED

The Foundation aims to have a lean grant-making function to prioritise funding for grant holders over direct foundation costs, and has built simple, efficient processes to support its decision-making and reporting processes. In doing so, the Foundation embeds trust and proportionality into its grant-making and grant reporting processes, which enables grant holders to focus on the substance of their work and is appreciated by them.

However, having a small staff team could limit the Foundation's ability to deepen elements of its grant-making approach, such as working more closely in partnership with grant holders (considered below), or undertaking more influencing, and it would need to consider the resource implications of any shift in approach.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Broadly speaking, we identified two dimensions to the Foundation's partnership working: its relational approach to working with grant holders, and its delivery of joint work with grant holders.

Firstly, the Foundation seeks to work with grant holders in a way that centres relationships and balances the power dynamic between funder and grant holder. In other words, partnerships that are relational rather than transactional and that challenge traditional, top-down approaches to philanthropy. Feedback from

grant holders suggests that in the most part they experience this from the Foundation, despite the in-built power dynamic caused by differential control over resources that will exist irrespective of levels of self-awareness and risk mitigation practised within a foundation.

Secondly, there is appetite from both the Foundation and grant holders for partnership working that goes beyond the provision of financial resource, for example by strengthening collaboration (through convening); and standing in solidarity with grant holders when they face unwelcome media or political scrutiny. This speaks to a more horizontal partnership model that is distinct from a funder-grant-holder relationship that is predominantly administrative.

Across the sector, foundations are developing increasing self-awareness of their power and positionality. Many are exploring what it means to reshape relationships with grant holders. The Foundation is no exception and is highly thoughtful about how it approaches relationships with grant holders. A note of caution was flagged around partnership working and the importance of being aware of how the power dynamic between funder and grant holder could lead funders to behave in extractive ways. The very fact this was raised in interviews with Foundation staff suggests that aiming to avoid such a scenario is a considered part of the Foundation's process of building relationships.

LONG-TERM, SYSTEMIC CHANGE

One of the clearest messages from grant holders related to their need for longer-term funding, and for funders to play a greater role in supporting the security and sustainability of grant holders' work. The Foundation generally provides project funding of 3-5 years, and within the SCS programme, projects tend to focus on the development of new collaborations, new ideas, the generation of new evidence or scaling up. Some grant holders received continuation funding, but the Foundation does not guarantee this.

Grant holders spoke of their challenges securing funding to sustain the impact of their work, once an idea or project had proven its worth, pointing to the tendency among funders to support early-stage work rather than supporting organisations to sustain or grow

their impact. They acknowledged, however, that in a context where funders' spend is not changing significantly, decisions need to be made around balancing funding for new ideas and funding for sustaining or growing good ideas.

The Foundation frequently connects grant holders to other funders, brokering introductions to widen income generation opportunities and enabling them to pitch their ideas. Suggestions were made by interviewees to broaden the tools used to sustain longer-term impact, including baking sustainability planning into the design of programmes in partnership with other funders, coupled with clarity and transparency around how decisions are made and how a project might be assessed to be eligible for continuation funding. A core funding approach, referred to above, would also give grant holders the ability to plan for the needs of the organisation over a longer time period rather than being tied to shorter-term project outcomes.

VOICE AND INFLUENCE

Different perspectives were offered on how the Foundation does and could use its voice, with a lack of alignment in perspectives across our interviewees. Many grant holders would like to see the Foundation using its voice alongside them to speak up on legal and human rights issues in the public domain. Some Foundation staff and Trustees are supportive of having an external profile as thought leaders in the legal and human rights space, while others express concerns about the Foundation having a campaigning role. A similar view was expressed by the other foundation-based interviewees who prefer to use their power to amplify grant holder voices rather than using their own voices for external influencing. The Foundation has a role in influencing the funding landscape for legal and human rights work, with a particular focus on bringing other foundations on board, however the pool of philanthropic funders remains tight-knit and influencing government on the funding landscape is not felt to be an effective strategy.

While joint campaigns with grant holders may not be a priority for the Foundation, there is potential for an ecosystem approach to influencing that is intentional about how the Foundation's levers – e.g. expertise and

thought leadership, funder connections, inside track influencing on policy rather than funding, and so on – can be mobilised in ways that are aligned with the collective goals of the sector.

“ I also think funders [should see] themselves as part of the ecosystem of change, because I think funders often see themselves as separate from it. But actually we’re very influential and powerful members ... of an ecosystem. And if you think about yourself within the ecosystem, I think it can lead you to use your resource a bit differently or to think about the impact of how you change where you put your resource differently. ”

External foundation interviewee

This could represent a broadening out of the systemic approach the Foundation takes to securing social change through grant-making, providing a wider variety of tools to draw upon in achieving their aims.

CONVENING AND CONNECTING

The Foundation’s residentials are highly regarded by grant holders, and feedback confirms that the Foundation’s approach to convening supports deeper relationships and increased collaboration. The relatively small size of the sector and individuals moving between organisations means that the impact of the convening can be sustained over time.

“ I think bringing people together is really, really important because also it’s a relatively small sector, and someone might be at, I don’t know, Liberty today, and then tomorrow might be working at Public Law Project, so knowing those people and knowing where they are, having a relationship with them if you need to do partnership working on a particular area of change you want to make. ”

Baring interviewee

The Foundation also convenes funders and brokers introductions to funders for grant holders to pitch their ideas, increase their visibility and develop new relationships that can help them widen their income sources.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE FOUNDATION’S APPROACH TO GRANT-MAKING

Overall, the evidence from this evaluation paints a positive picture of how the Foundation works, pointing to a field building approach to grant-making that is more than the provision of financial support. The Foundation effectively uses its funder power and positionality as part of an ecosystem of organisations to drive change, using a range of levers that play to their strengths i.e. expertise, flexibility, partnership, convening, and so on. Naming and analysing these levers provides a basis for the Foundation to collectively reflect on how it works as part of that ecosystem, to monitor and improve approaches to grant-making, explore any gaps and identify levers that could be activated in greater depth.

Our findings identify a number of options available to the Foundation that could support it to do more of the same, and with intention, so there is clarity for both the Foundation and partners around how the Foundation complements the work of others.

Understanding the Foundation's position in the funding sector

IN THIS SECTION, WE ADDRESS THE EVALUATION QUESTION: WHERE DOES THE FOUNDATION FIT IN, IN RELATION TO THE REST OF THE FUNDING SECTOR, GIVEN ITS NICHE FOCUS?

We start this section with an analysis of grant holders' perspectives on the current context for civil society; before focusing in on the funding landscape supporting civil society's response to this context – first, analysing grants data to build a picture of who is funding in this area then looking at five funder strategies in more detail.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CURRENT CONTEXT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Interviews for this evaluation took place within the first year of a Labour government since the 2000s, and participants were dismayed at the lack of meaningful shift in policy affecting legal and human rights organisations, which they had hoped for in the years of Conservative rule. Interviewees voices concerns around hostility towards civil society organisations from several domains:

- being shut out of policy discussions by hostile politicians;
- being targeted by media organisations and the Charity Commission for speaking out on certain issues;
- the risk of backlash and increasing mistrust of the legal system among the general public. This is partly caused by civil society's over-reliance on taking legal challenges without bringing the public with them through accompanied communications and political work.

In Scotland, there is a contrasting sense of hope in the political context and a sense that civil society, which is closer to decision-makers, has greater agency and influence.

There is anger at the continued plight of the legal advice sector, with some suggesting that the problem of advice deserts is getting worse, and availability of free legal advice remains critically limited. A lack of funding is compounded by rising costs and rising demand for support. While interviewees are inspired by the way in which civil society continues to fight back, people are exhausted:

“ We are all running on empty, every single CEO, every single chief officer, every single organisation, we've been gutted in so many different ways, and we're all really fragile, and we're all saying that to each other, you know, we're all working stupid hours, we're all just stupidly fragile. ”

Grant holder interviewee

Trends in the funding landscape are frustrating for grant holders. Many philanthropic funders have closed or paused funding programmes, some interviewees noted increasingly restrictive funding policies. Public funding cuts continue to pose significant risks, and many international funders are shifting resource to the US in response to political shifts and moving funding out of the UK and Europe. Interviewees noted that budget gaps are leading to organisations and people leaving the sector and strategic opportunities for change are left unaddressed because of a lack of capacity to follow through.

THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE FOR LEGAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS WORK

We conducted a keyword search of all grants made between 1st January 2015 and 1st November 2025 containing the keywords ‘legal justice human rights’. This revealed a total of 26.6k grants made, with 13,416 recipient organisations and 215 funds. Of these, 143 grants were made by the Baring Foundation.

Figure 5 compares the number of grants given by the 18 largest funders, to the total money given over the past 10 years.

Excluding government departments, the five largest funders of this work over the last ten years, by number of grants given, were:

- AB Charitable Trust (1,020 grants)
- Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (788 grants)
- Access to Justice Foundation (592 grants)
- Trust for London (438 grants)
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation (417 grants)

The Baring Foundation was the 19th largest funder in terms of number of grants given, with 143 grants.

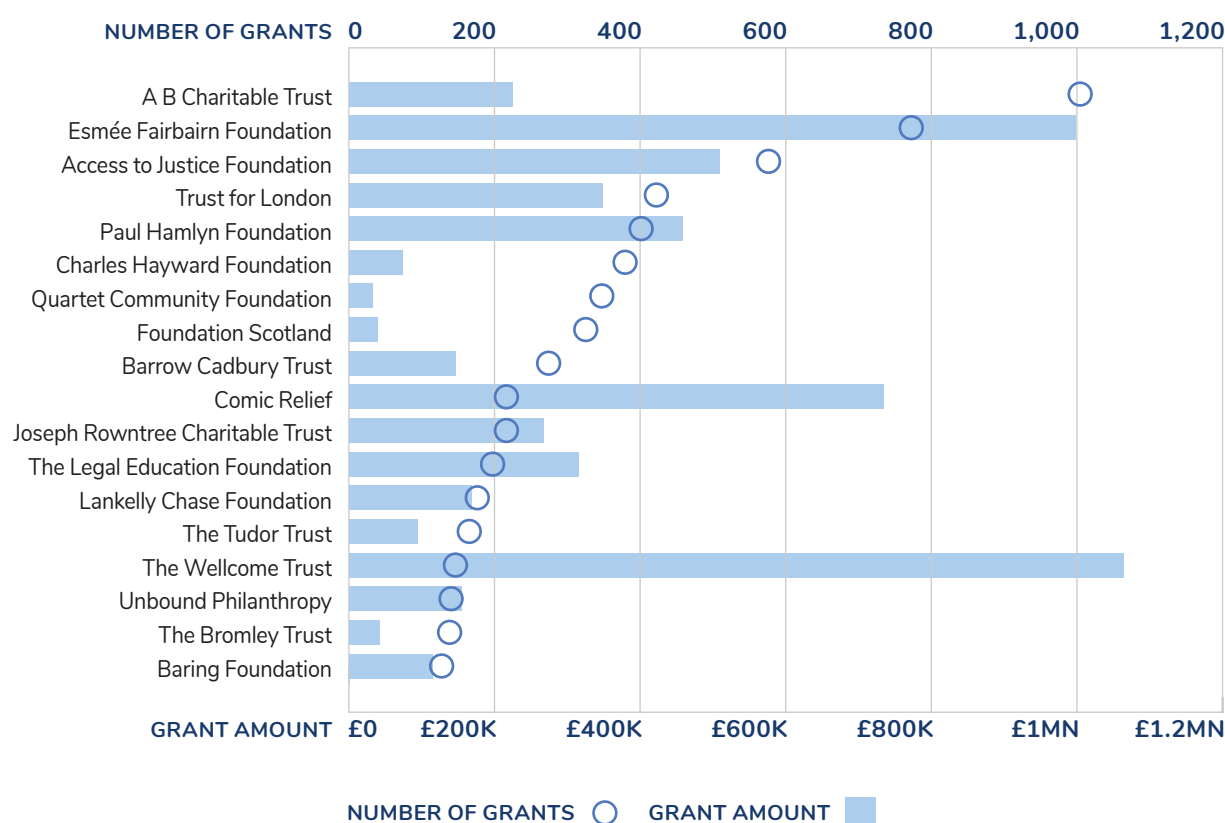
FUNDER STRATEGIES

We identified five foundations working in a similar space to the Foundation, based on our analysis of 360 Giving data, interviews and consultation with the Foundation staff team:

- AB Charitable Trust
- Access to Justice Foundation
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- The Legal Education Foundation
- Trust for London

We have used publicly available strategy information and interviews with contacts at grantholding organisations to summarise their current strategies and the ways of working that they consider to be central to their grant-making approach. Since the focus of our work was fully understanding the Baring Foundation’s programme, and placing it in context, we have not evaluated the delivery or impact of these other funding strategies.

Figure 5: Tracking number of grants given and total grant spend over 10 years



We finish this section by analysing trends across the five foundations and any relevant overlaps with Baring Foundation.

AB Charitable Trust (ABCT):

Focuses on work that upholds the human rights framework promotes dignity for everyone and defends the rights of society's most marginalised, particularly refugees, migrants and those affected by the justice system. Its 2023–2027 strategy supports organisations using the law as a tool for social change, especially where legal work intersects with poverty, racism, and discrimination. ABCT adopts a human rights-based and asset-based approach, funding work that is often hard to resource and that tackles systemic injustices. A key fund is its Anchor Programme, which strengthens sector infrastructure by supporting second-tier organisations that convene, connect and build movements. ABCT prioritises long-term, core funding and strong relationships with grantees.

Access to Justice Foundation (ATJF):

Aims to expand access to free legal advice across the UK. Its strategy includes four funding strands: improving outcomes through early legal support; empowering marginalised communities via core funding; enhancing pro bono legal services for disabled people; and addressing workforce challenges by supporting aspiring social justice solicitors. ATJF also convenes networks to facilitate collaboration, share learning, and explore innovative approaches to legal advice delivery.

Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF):

Envisions a just society where everyone, especially young people, can thrive. Its strategy includes several systems change-focused funds. The Migration Fund supports migrant-led organisations challenging harm in the UK's immigration system. The Youth Fund and Youth Strategic Investment Fund back organisations working with young people facing systemic barriers, offering core and strategic development funding. The Arts Fund supports cultural organisations advancing social justice through creative practice. The Backbone Fund provides long-term core funding to infrastructure organisations driving equity and systems change. PHF also offers

non-financial support, including convening, capacity building support and a significant programme of evaluation and learning.

The Legal Education Foundation (TLEF):

Centres its strategy on using the law to drive systemic change. Its three focus areas include: supporting legal work embedded in social movements and led by communities; investing in legal leadership through programmes such as the Justice First Fellowship; and leveraging its influence as a funder and investor to catalyse change. TLEF's approach is grounded in anti-oppression, relational grant-making, and a commitment to learning and solidarity. It aims to help organisations build sustainable foundations to increase their impact and resilience in the current challenging context.

Trust for London (TL)

Has developed a 2030 strategy focused on reducing poverty and inequality in London through two pillars: economic and social justice. The economic justice programme promotes decent work, fair welfare systems, and affordable housing, while addressing the poverty premium. The social justice programme targets systemic inequalities affecting minoritised communities, including migrant destitution, disability injustice and racial inequity. TL also provides social investments with flexible terms to support growth and impact, especially for smaller or first-time recipients. TL delivers strategic initiatives and convenes networks to help build civil society capacity and drive long-term, systemic change across the city.

ANALYSIS OF THE FOUNDATION'S POSITION WITHIN THIS LANDSCAPE

The five funder strategies show some trends in 1) the focus areas for grant-making; and 2) approaches to grant-making. These partially overlap with the Foundation's focus areas and approach. However, sampling five of the most similar foundations among tens of thousands across the UK suggests that, even with a partial overlap, the Foundation can still be comfortably characterised as 'niche', providing a unique form of support to the sector. Further, given the challenges faced by grant holders to find suitable funding to sustain or grow

their legal and human rights work in the UK, there are no concerns of oversaturation in the funding landscape.

Some of the similarities between the SCS programme and these other funder strategies are as follows. Three of the funders' strategies centre around the use of the law as a tool for social change, including two where this is explicitly part of a wider toolbox of change approaches such as narrative work and campaigning, and embedding the law in movements for social justice. Only one, however, explicitly uses the language of human rights in their strategy. Almost all of the funders use the language of 'systems change' (we argue above that systems change is more implicit in the Foundation's strategy), and support organisations who work 'systemically', for example, addressing the root causes of issues, working collaboratively across organisations using diverse change tactics, working towards long-term change, building sector infrastructure and centring lived experience. Two of the funders have a dedicated sector infrastructure fund, although many will be funding infrastructure functions across their funds.

There are overlaps in the groups that these funders are aiming to benefit. Some have more targeted funding areas e.g. on migration, racial justice and criminal justice, which are also significant features of the Foundation's portfolio, despite having an open rather than targeted approach to focus area.

Some of the funders talk explicitly about wanting to build trusting, relational relationships with grant holders. While a light touch approach to grant-making is not front and centre of the strategies, two of the five are signatories of [IVAR's open and trusting grant-making](https://www.ivar.org.uk/open-and-trusting-grant-making),¹ which advocates for light touch processes (much like the Foundation's). One speaks about the importance of showing solidarity with grant holders facing challenges in the external political context and working together to address these challenges. There is a strong focus on learning across the board, with emerging insight informing strategic directions.

There will be many differences in strategy and ways of working between funders that cannot be gleaned from a written strategy. However, we have identified some areas that suggest a difference in emphasis.

Firstly, in relation to strategy, among those with a particular focus on supporting legal and human rights organisations, there are strategic priorities on public legal education and legal sector workforce development and sustainability, which differ in focus from the SCS programme.

Many of the funders convene grant holders, although only one holds residential retreats similar to the Foundation's. The trend appears to be one of convening communities of practice or policy networks over time around targeted focus areas, using funders' convening power and resource to support collaboration and collective impact. Some have established funder plus programmes including capacity building support, with one funder focusing on approaches to care for grant holders in light of the challenges, trauma and burnout facing those working in the sector.

An area that stands out more in the other funders' strategies is the language of equity, anti-oppression and intersectionality; although this does not mean these practices do not inform the Baring Foundation's ways of working. Several of the funders prioritise funding organisations that are led by people with lived experience of the communities they serve and/or have co-designed their funding programmes alongside organisations. The provision of core, multi-year funding is a clear trend among the other funders, with aims to sustain the sector's impact in a turbulent external environment.

¹ www.ivar.org.uk/open-and-trusting

Conclusions and recommendations

SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMME OUTCOMES

The Strengthening Civil Society programme has supported civil society to broaden its use of legal tools by increasing shared understanding and learning, and collaboration, including between specialist and non-specialist legal organisations. In doing so, the programme has strengthened the ecosystem of civil society, with organisations working as part of a bigger whole with greater self-awareness of their positionality and the benefits of complementary change tactics alongside legal and human rights approaches, such as policy influencing, campaigning and communications. Sector infrastructure has also been built, for example, new networks, new resources and new ways of connecting casework and data to strategic legal work.

SYSTEMS CHANGE

From this richer tapestry, organisations are stepping back from working case to case, to think more laterally and strategically about how to create systemic change, such as change to policy, behaviours and narratives. However, working to change systems is inextricably linked to the sector's frontline services function, whose future must be secured.

While the Foundation does not use the language of systems change unlike many of its peer funders, the shape and outcomes of the programme have many characteristics in common with a systems approach, such as greater strategic collaboration, challenging root causes of issues and changing narratives as well as structures. The analysis and tools that have emerged from systems change practice have the potential to strengthen civil society's collective challenge to the threats civil society faces to its freedoms.

→ There could be an opportunity to draw further on some of the tools and frameworks developed in the body of work on systems change to build on the Foundation's current strategy, without any requirement to adopt a new language which some may feel can create barriers.

CORE, FLEXIBLE AND LONG-TERM SUPPORT

Flexibility given to grant holders has been key in allowing them to explore and try new things.

→ As a key pillar of the Foundation's approach, the practice of funding flexibly and responsively could be deepened through more of a core funding than a project funding-based approach.

There is weaker evidence from this evaluation of the programme's impact on making the case for additional funding for this kind of legal and human rights work, meaning that whereas the pot can be used more flexibly, it is not increasing. This creates real challenges going forward for the sustainability of civil society organisations and the impact they deliver. Indeed we found that organisations are precarious and facing significant risks.

→ This kind of work needs to be sustained via long-term and strategic funding commitments, underpinned by a range of funders working in partnership.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

There are concerns within the Foundation team about the existence of thematic 'gaps' in the sector. The Foundation may be well placed to fill such gaps, particularly in cases where the team holds relevant knowledge and expertise. However, it will be important to do so in a way that builds on the programme's success in supporting organic work and 'funding the best, whatever it is'.

→ Evidence from this evaluation suggests there is merit in deepening the Foundation's current strategy, rather than a significant shift in focus, and we recommend that any decision to pivot to alternative thematic areas be made in conjunction with a wider body of evidence.

→ Where there is less evidence of success – namely, broadening the funding landscape – we recommend changing tactics rather than the goal itself and building on the success of the programme to encourage a broader range of funders to play a role in supporting legal and human rights approaches.

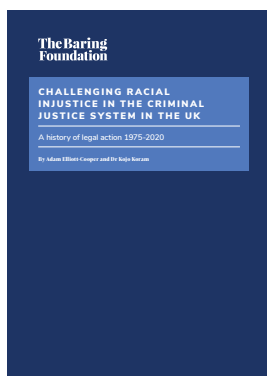
DEEPENING THE BARING FOUNDATION'S APPROACH TO GRANT-MAKING

The evidence in this evaluation highlights the merits of the Foundation's relationship and field-building approach to grant-making, and ideas for deepening the Foundation's current practice. The Foundation generally works in a relational and light-touch way, which grant holders appreciate and are positive about.

→ For grant holders, there is a desire for a deeper partnership and sense of collaboration with the Foundation. This could take many forms, but could include long-term funding commitments, taking a more proactive role in shaping work together through co-design and participatory approaches, working collaboratively and intentionally towards systems change, and sharing some of the perceived 'risks' that many grant holders feel they are facing. This could open up an avenue for healthy challenge from a wider range of trusted and knowledgeable voices, in a similar way to the healthy debate within the Foundation team that helps to challenge assumptions, give momentum to the Foundation's analysis and ensures accountability to meeting the emerging needs of the legal and human rights field.

Selected Baring Foundation resources

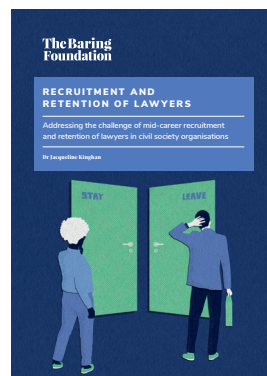
All resources can be found on our website www.baringfoundation.org.uk



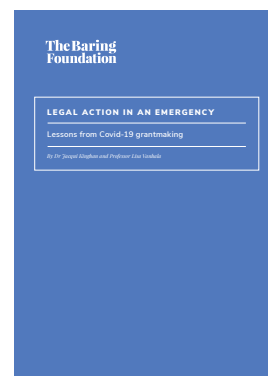
Challenging racial injustice in the criminal justice system in the UK: A history of legal action 1975-2020
Adam Elliott-Cooper and Dr Kojo Koram
2024



Revised framework for effective use of the law
Professor Lisa Vanhala and Professor Jacqueline Kinghan
2024



Recruitment and retention of lawyers: Addressing the challenge of mid-career recruitment and retention of lawyers in civil society organisations
Dr Jacqui Kinghan
2023



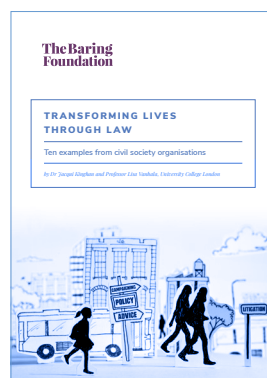
Legal action in an emergency: Lessons from Covid-19 grant-making
Dr Jacqui Kinghan and Professor Lisa Vanhala
2022



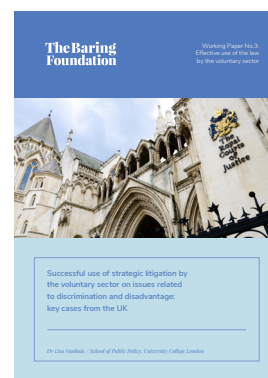
The pursuit of racial justice through legal action: An overview of how UK civil society has used the law, 1990-2020
Dr Bharat Malkani, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University
2021



Evaluation of the Strengthening Civil Society programme
Hidden Depths Research
2020



Transforming lives through law: Ten examples from civil society organisations
Dr Jacqui Kinghan and Professor Lisa Vanhala
2019



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Professor Lisa Vanhala
2017

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