CITY BRIDGE FOUNDATION

TSIP THE SOCIAL INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP

The Anchor Learning Programme: **Insights for the sector**

The Social Innovation Partnership

Introduction

The Anchor Learning Programme is a central element of City Bridge Foundation's Anchor Programme, which **supports equity-led second-tier voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations across London**. Co-designed in 2022 with VCS organisations and facilitated by TSIP, the Learning Programme ran for two years alongside the Anchor Fund, which provides long-term grants of seven to ten years. The Learning Programme focused on capacity building and systems change, bringing funded organisations together to build relationships, share learning and engage in collective, peer-led reflection. The Anchor Fund is distinctive in its provision of long-term, core funding to second-tier, by-and-for infrastructure organisations, enabling sustained collaboration, adaptability and strategic planning.

The Anchor Programme represents the culmination of City Bridge Foundation's long-standing commitment to strengthening London's civil society infrastructure. Recognising the critical role of infrastructure organisations, City Bridge Foundation has consistently invested in their sustainability and innovation. The programme builds on a series of prior initiatives, including strategic grants to at-risk infrastructure bodies in 2015, the Way Ahead report in 2016 mapping London's civil society infrastructure, and the Cornerstone Fund, developed with the National Lottery Community Fund and Trust for London to support consortiums tackling pan-London issues. City Bridge Foundation also supported the Civil Society Roots Programme in 2017 and 2022/23, delivered with the Mayor of London and National Lottery Community Fund, focusing on infrastructure organisations through an equity lens. Its involvement in the London Community Response Fund, which prioritised equity and innovation, further informed the design of the Anchor Programme.

While these initiatives provided valuable short-term support, learning from them highlighted the need for longer-term, sustainable investment. The Anchor Programme responds to this by **shifting from project-based funding to long-term, systemic investment,** rooted in City Bridge Foundation's history of responsive funding, strategic collaborations, and commitment to equity, sustainability, and movement building.

Development of the Learning Programme

The regular learning programme offered a balance of structure and iteration to ensure the sessions were contextual and tailored to funded organisations' interests and needs.

The Programme is guided by four key goals:

1. Establishing a theoretical foundation to maintain and embed systems change – aligning the work of funded organisations with systemic impact by developing shared tools that drive long-term transformation.

2. Factilitate peer learning and collaboration – through creating a network of organisations that recognise the benefits of peer learning, co-develop resources, and provide mutual support to navigate challenges.

3. Amplify the voices of funded organisations – ensuring organisations' experiences, challenges, and successes are communicated to funders, policymakers, and the broader voluntary sector to influence systemic change.

4. Reframing the funder and funded organisation's relationship – through embedding a partnership mindset between the power holders of this fund, which includes involving funding managers to encourage a relational working style.

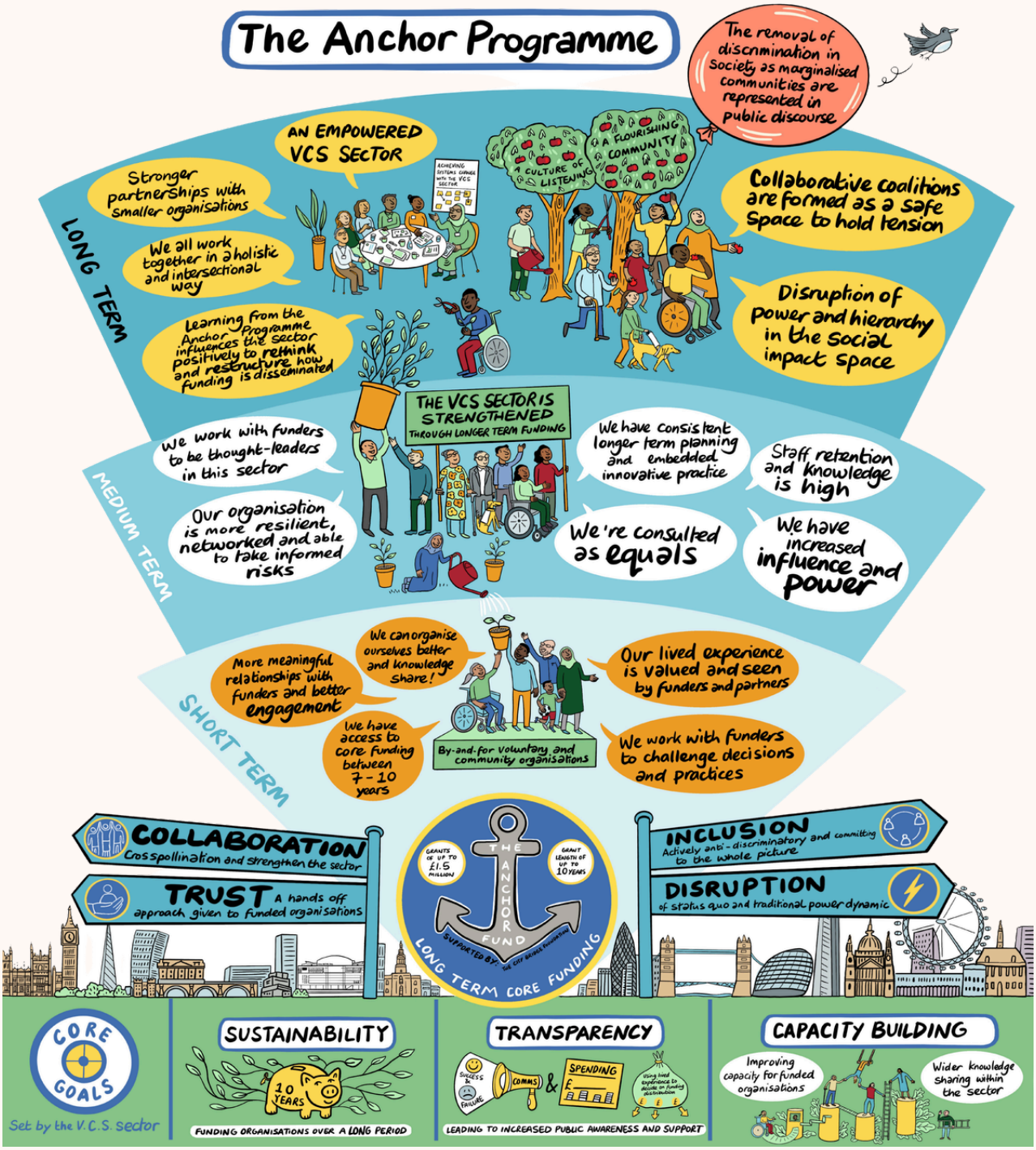
Whilst delivering the programme, we recognised that each organisation was entering the Learning Programme from a different perspective and experience. We made sure that sessions had clear structure, **with collaborative tasks and resources provided before and after sessions**. This helped organisations join the space feeling prepared but not overburdened. We also provided **one-to-one catch ups** and offline input for those unable to join sessions.

"The learning programme has been an excellent experience so far in allowing us to connect with other community infrastructure colleagues and learn more about our shared successes and challenges we collectively face. This has been a highly empowering and validating experience, allowing us to commonly reflect as allies on the areas that we are working on collectively"

– *Quote from funded organisation*

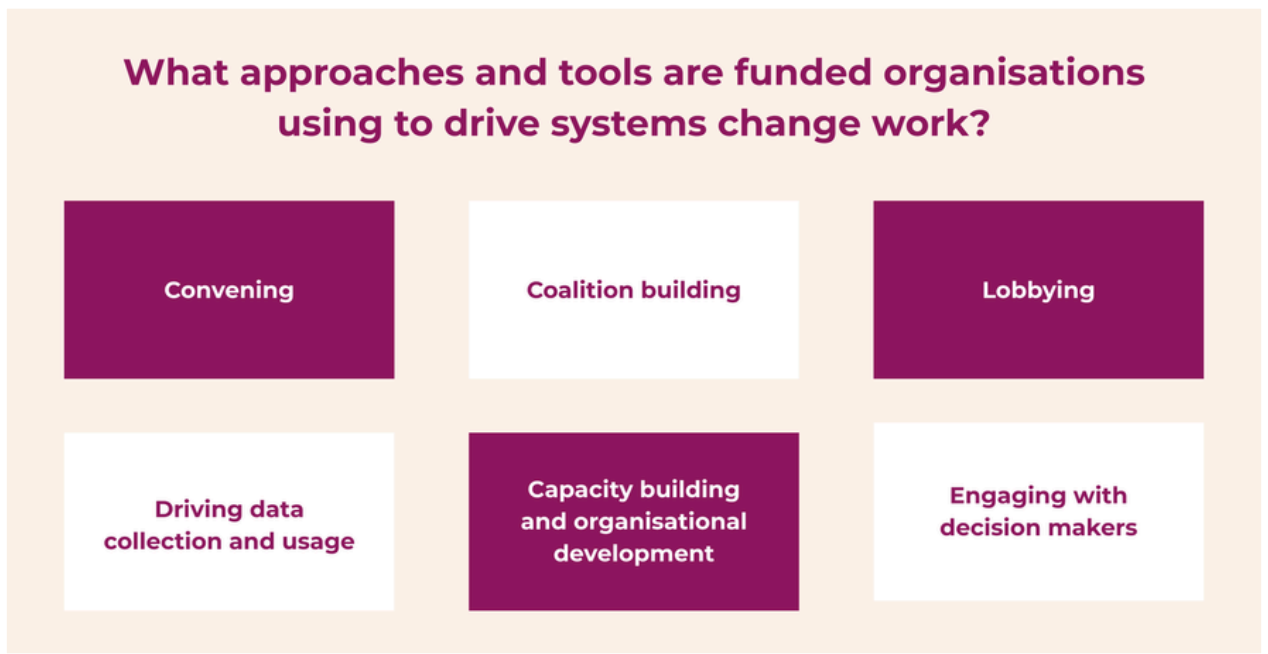
Learning and Impact

Below is the Anchor Programme Theory of Change (created by Anchor organisations.) As you read through this document, we have signposted against the insights where some of these outcomes have begun to be evidenced in the first two years of the Anchor Programme.



Initial impact of Anchor Funding

Alongside developing this Theory of Change, TSIP explored with the Anchor organisations what tools they are using to drive systems change:



Capacity building and organisational development

In the first two years of their grants, round 1 Anchor organisations used funding to strengthen internal systems, policies, and infrastructure. Many implemented new CRM and finance systems to improve engagement, data collection, and decision-making. These upgrades have been key to building organisational resilience as service delivery expanded faster than existing structures could manage.

Our organisation is more resilient, networked and able to take informed risks.

We have consistent longer term planning and embedded innovative risk practice.

Convening and Coalition building

Organisations have used funding to become more innovative, creative, and to reimagine their processes and structures around convening and coalition building. Anchor organisations have expanded and deepened their engagement approaches with their members, service users and with other voluntary and community organisations.

Lobbying and engaging with decision makers

Longer-term funding has enabled organisations to consider the levers they can use to drive systems change and to plan strategically around them. One key lever frequently mentioned by Anchor organisations is policy influencing, which requires sustained, long-term planning and execution. Many Anchor organisations have used funding to focus on policy influencing and advocacy work, including engaging the media.

We have increased influence and power.

Initial Learning from Anchor Processes:
Co-design, flexibility and relational working has enabled organisations to drive systems change

We're consulted as equals.

The Anchor Programme combined financial support with flexibility and a deep understanding of the unique needs of by-and-for infrastructure organisations. This approach enabled groups to sustain staff, communities, and systems change work during a challenging period.

1. **Co-design** has been central to Anchor's success. From inception, City Bridge Foundation engaged 22 civil society organisations, facilitated by TSIP, to shape the fund's vision, objectives, and monitoring framework. Funded organisations valued this collaborative process, describing it as empowering, inclusive, and reflective of genuine partnership between funder and grantee.

Our lived experience is valued and seen by funders and partners.

2. Flexibility in funding has been equally vital. The programme recognised that systems change often requires time-intensive relationship building rather than immediate spending, allowing organisations, to adapt their budgets accordingly. This adaptability also enabled organisational responses to national crises, like the 2024 far-right anti-immigration protests. City Bridge Foundation's trust-based, responsive approach has strengthened relationships and enhanced the programme's **overall impact**.

3. Relational working has proved to be a powerful tool in driving systems change. Anchor organisations described their relationships with funding managers as genuine partnerships, strengthened through regular, **collaborative learning sessions** and open dialogue. Site visits (as part of the monitoring and evaluation process) felt supportive rather than extractive due to this trust. A key challenge is sustaining these relationships through staff changes; this requires strong handovers and embedding relational practice into organisational culture.

We work with funders to challenge decisions and practices.

4. Peer Learning has been at the heart of this work. Regular convening and structured learning sessions have brought a wealth of benefit to the ambitions of the Anchor Programme, including:
   - Strong relationships have formed amongst funded organisations to support each other's organisational ambitions, attending each other's events, sharing knowledge, offering advice, and jointly problem-solving.
   - Through regular convening funded organisations have benefitted from hearing how different organisations approach similar issues but from a **different perspective**.
   - Peer learning has been a safe space, providing emotional support, specifically during difficult contextual challenges that we have encountered over the past two years.

We all work together in a holistic and intersectional way.

Reflections from Anchor Leads, Khadra Aden and Clara Espinosa

Learning from the Anchor Programme influences the sector positively to rethink and restructure how funding is disseminated

The Anchor Programme served as a pilot for innovative funding practices, beginning with a **co-design process** that shaped eligibility criteria, application questions, communication strategies, and impact measurement. A dedicated webpage supported clear communication through FAQs, a glossary of definitions with examples, and later, case studies from the first funding round. Pre-application support was provided through webinars, with participant questions incorporated into the FAQ section to enhance accessibility and transparency.

The programme also introduced a more **relational approach to grant-making**. Funding managers received structured peer support through weekly meetings and paired assessments, while funded partners were engaged through regular catch-ups and in-person networking events. The impact and learning report was co-designed with funded partners and complemented by reflection visits. Insights from the programme contributed to the development of the Standing with Londoners funding policy—introducing practices such as two-stage applications and a shift toward addressing root causes and supporting systems change. It is encouraging to see **the influence of the programme extend to other foundations**, leading to long-term core grant commitments of up to ten years, such as those now offered by the National Lottery Community Fund. As a result, City Bridge Foundation is forming a community of practice with other funders who are working on transformative philanthropy to share good practice, learnings and challenges.

Thank you

The Social Innovation Partnership for City Bridge Foundation

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