



# Coming together to celebrate courage

*December 2022*

ACF annual conference 2022 – key themes



## Introduction

ACF held its [annual conference](#) in November this year. This was the first face to face conference since 2019 and the desire to physically meet old and new colleagues working in the funding sector was evident – all tickets were sold out by October.

The theme of the conference was **“Courage: leadership in the next decade”** and Carol Mack, chief executive of ACF, [set the tone for the day](#) stating that courage is essential now given the challenges of our times. Carol explored what courageous foundation leadership looks like – “feel the fear and do it anyway”.

This exploration of courage ran as a golden thread through Professor Lucy Easthope’s keynote speech, the panel discussion involving David Knott (CEO, National Lottery Community Fund), Junior Smart (SOS Gangs Project), Danny Sriskandarajah (CEO, Oxfam GB), Róisín Wood (CEO, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland); and in the 14 breakout sessions that the delegates could choose from. Many different takes on courage were heard but some key themes emerged.

### Courage to lean into tough conversations

As we heard throughout the day, it takes courage not to shy away from tough conversations. Although our natural tendency is often to avoid discomfort and conflict, learning to lean into uncomfortable situations is vital if leaders are to tackle challenges head on. As David Knott noted on the panel, a courageous leader sees the system they are operating in and is part of and understands how to drive change in that system.

Disaster recovery planner Professor Lucy Easthope spoke in her keynote speech about the importance of brave conversations today to be prepared for what might happen in the future. Rather than be caught off guard, she encouraged delegates to play a ‘wildcard’ role within their teams. This dissenting voice can help the organisation think about work through the lens of reasonable worst-case scenarios, to have business continuity plans that prepared for these scenarios, and to actively horizon scan to build the evidence on what might be coming your way.

On a practical level, this might include knowing your local and national risk registers, building a group of external contacts to obtain intelligence and foresight, and identifying what good looks like in the different scenarios.

### Courage to acknowledge your power and privilege as foundations

The process of being uncomfortable also extends to acknowledging power and privilege. In her opening words, Carol Mack spoke of the power that comes with the resources that foundations hold and the privilege that has been afforded to foundations by society. Sophia Parker from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation noted in her breakout discussion on courageous leadership: “If you’re comfortable today you are being protected by certain markers of privilege.” In this context, a courageous leader was seen as one who recognised where their own background and experiences might make them part of the problem.

There was a whole breakout session dedicated to “Understanding our legacy” and the challenges and successes in understanding and documenting a foundation's history. A critical step was seen as confronting injustices of the past, being open and honest about your history, where your money comes from, and how this informs and develops your leadership in the future – however uncomfortable this journey may feel for some foundations.

As part of closing remarks on the panel, Danny Sriskandarajah recounted a quote from Dr Lilla Watson, a Murri Gangulu woman: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

### Courage to face multiple, complex challenges

There was an acute awareness that we are living in complex times, where charities had not had enough time to recover from the pressures of the pandemic before being thrust into the cost of living crisis. This has left many funders with the dilemma of balancing the need to address immediate need with the desire to continue to work on entrenched issues which require a longer term vision for change.

In the breakout session on “Courageous leadership in the foundation space”, it was felt that foundations needed to accept this radical uncertainty and lead from there. Leaders need to learn to embrace pluralism – being comfortable working with different timescales, different depth on issues, and practice discernment along the way.

Another breakout session, “Giving it everything: in defence of spend down” explored spending down endowments as a response to the grave challenges we face today. Some foundations and philanthropists have decided to spend down to address the key challenges of our times, devoting all their resources to address the climate and biodiversity crises, for example, and meet their charitable missions.

### Courage to take risks, iterate and learn

It was recognised that foundations are in a good position to take risks, in ways that other funders in the wider ecosystem are not. As Carol Mack noted in her welcome, the independence of foundations and their limited accountabilities to their trustees and mission create the “near perfect conditions for being courageous.”

This was a perspective shared by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation who felt a foundation’s independence meant they could be bolder without risk to their funding, say more and advocate for their grant partners. In their breakout session on “Defending our civic space” they argued foundations could do more to support ‘unleashing the capacity of civil society to create change’ at a time when civic space is seen to be at risk of [shrinking](#). Taking a position and stepping into the world of campaigning might feel uncomfortable and possibly reputationally risky but, they argued, was vital if foundations wanted to change things for the better and to influence people who have the power to make change – all with the aim of protecting the rights of their beneficiaries.

It was recognised that we won’t always get it right. Courageous leaders however are not afraid to fail or certainly are not encumbered by this fear. The advice was: accept that failures will happen but be prepared to share what didn’t work and learn from it. A courageous leader, in this context continues to find reasons to say yes and keeps asking ‘are we doing enough?’ and if something does not work the first time round, ask: “what else shall we do?”

We also heard about foundations and other partners working together to fund and innovate. One breakout session focused on how emergency challenges sparked regional funder collaboration in Yorkshire and Humber between Leeds Community Foundation and other funders. Collaboration and partnership working often encourage foundations to take bolder steps and embrace risk-taking, going further and achieving more than they would alone.

### Courage to shift power

It was really heartening to see the diversity at conference, with people and foundations represented from across the UK; with representation of Black and minoritised leaders and women broadly as you would expect for the sector – the former the minority, the latter the majority. Also represented was a range of ages, reflecting the leaders of today and the future leaders of tomorrow. With this diversity in the room, there was a notable awareness that the foundation sector needs to do more to carve out space for diverse voices, which was reflected in the breakout session “Funding a more equitable future” and by a number of speakers.

Junior Smart, who works with people touched by the criminal justice system, spoke powerfully on the panel about the importance of building people up, especially those from marginalised communities “when their background is so far away from this.” He expressed his wish for more to be done to support those from within marginalised communities to step into leadership and decision-making positions, so that they no longer “co-produce but produce the services” and for power to be meaningfully shifted. Addressing the leaders in the room, he noted the need for courage as power is handed over to the next generation of leaders.

### Courage to work alongside others and as an ally

A stepping stone to shifting power is standing up with and for others as an ally. There has been much recent debate on what good allyship looks like. For some this is a pathway to shifting power and knowing when to step down, create space and make room for other voices; for others allyship that counts means not just providing funding but access to networks, knowledge and expertise, the means to get there and crucially not to be shut down when questioning systems. The challenge to foundations in the room was to show courage, as Danny Srisandarajah put it, to back ideas, people and institutions that have a chance to deliver a radically better world given what we face.

Working with others might also involve engaging with those who have a different world view to you. Róisín Wood, drawing upon her experience working in the Northern Irish context, spoke on the panel about the importance of humility and empathy within courage and the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Only then is it possible to understand and work better together with and for diverse communities.

### Courage going forward

It became clear from conversations on the day that the sector is at a critical juncture and courageous leadership is needed now. As Carol Mack noted in her opening address: "It feels like now is a pivotal moment for foundations, where over the next 10 years we can build on this courage and leadership with hope. Or we can fall back to our comfort zone in the onslaught of crisis after crisis, and fail to seize the potential of this moment."

Further crises may lie ahead but foundations have demonstrated that they can – and should – rise to the challenges of the times. Leaders are increasingly reflecting on both the structures they operate in and the power and responsibility that comes with that to drive change. Courageous leadership is also about convening, creating spaces for others and knowing when to step away. Over the next 10 years, this courageous leadership can be built on for a brighter future.



## Further reading/resources

Minister Stuart Andrew's [speech](#)

[Third Sector article](#) on the conference

[Civil Society article](#) on the conference

More information on Professor Lucy Easthope's work can be found here: [Whatevernext – Professor Lucy Easthope](#)

[Britain talks climate](#) was recommended as a very good toolkit in the Change the story session.

We'd like to hear your thoughts on conference and these themes. Email [policy@acf.org.uk](mailto:policy@acf.org.uk).