

FAST, FLEXIBLE, CALM AND COMPASSIONATE – HERE’S HOW TWO NFPS ARE HELPING OTHER NFPS THROUGH THE PANDEMIC



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None of us have ever experienced anything like the COVID-19 pandemic. It has affected nearly every person, everywhere – but not equally. While NFPs in Australia have been hit hard in general, each one has been impacted in a different way. The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) and Justice Connect are both experienced and influential Australian NFPs that support other NFPs. Their responses to the pandemic provide an interesting contrast and some guidelines for the recovery.

Go fast, go digital – the Justice Connect story

Justice Connect designs and delivers high-impact interventions to increase access to legal support and achieve social justice in Australia. It has a specialist service, Not-for-profit Law, which offers free or low-cost legal advice to community organisations. As the primary legal resource for cash-strapped NFPs, it quickly realised the massive impact COVID-19 would have on its operations. It knew it would need to act quickly. One big advantage it had was its well-known website backed by new digital platforms.

When COVID-19 hit Australia, Justice Connect swiftly re-organised the NFP Law website. The team wanted to make sure that NFPs could find answers to their most common questions quickly and easily. It also ran a series of free webinars and prepared fact sheets and briefing papers covering the most common enquiries, things like:

- What are our legal obligations to staff and volunteers during this time? Are we liable if they catch COVID-19?
- We’re legally required to hold an AGM, but we’re not allowed to hold meetings, what do we do?

- What are our rights with insurance and contractual issues if we're forced to cancel events?

By dealing with these common enquiries digitally, it enabled NFP Law to provide 41% more bespoke legal assistance* in the first two months when the pandemic hit. It wouldn't have been able to do this without its efficient and flexible website and digital platforms (webinar, pro bono matching and online intake platforms).

NFP Law offers high-quality, professional legal advice at free or heavily subsidised rates – so there's always high demand for its services. While it can't offer everyone bespoke help, it can offer everyone assistance digitally. Five years ago NFP Law set out to build a better website, knowing it would enable it to triage enquiries more effectively and help more people in need, more efficiently. A multi-year grant from [Perpetual's IMPACT Philanthropy Application Program](#) enabled Justice Connect to embark on a significant upgrade of NFP Law's digital presence which finished in 2019. Funding was provided by a number of trusts managed by Perpetual, including The Samuel Nissen Charitable Foundation and H & L Hecht Trust.

Sue Woodward, Head of Not-for-profit Law at Justice Connect explains:

“The grant helped us to scale up our NFP Law service...to take it national. Now when you look at the website you can filter the entire site for your geographic area so you only see what's relevant for you...The laws on fundraising are very state specific, and other laws are as well, so it's a way of helping people through a maze of laws and also enabling them to navigate through the lifecycle of their organisation.”

This upgrade has allowed NFP Law to now spend far more time on bespoke interventions for more difficult cases, or higher impacting cases.

Be flexible, be available, don't panic – the FRRR way

FRRR champions rural, regional and remote Australia. It partners with and connects different parts of business, society and government to help address the disparity between urban Australia and the Bush. As part of this it both seeks, and distributes, grant money to Australian communities.

FRRR is used to crises. In the last year alone there have been droughts, bushfires, floods and now a pandemic. This has given the team significant experience in dealing with stressful situations, enabling them to respond in a measured way when things heat up.

Natalie Egleton, CEO of FRRR, explains the approach they took for COVID-19:

“FRRR's general approach and strategy to any crisis and disaster is to take a medium to long-term view. We don't presume anything, and have taken a listen and respond approach to this situation.”

FRRR typically directs a significant amount of its recovery funding to events that bring the community together. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, most of these events simply weren't able to be held, especially around Easter time. It wasn't just events that were impacted however, FRRR also funds face-to-face workshops, infrastructure and art initiatives. When the pandemic arrived FRRR knew all of these activities were likely to be affected one way or another, but didn't know to what extent they'd need to be delayed or cancelled. For Natalie and the team, flexibility was the key:

“We decided, quite early on, that we'd fund anything we would have done anyway and then provide a level of flexibility and support to enable communities to make the funding work for them.”

As well as this level-headed, overall strategy the FRRR team made sure they were very available and involved in what was happening in the communities they support. They have been very “high touch” with communities, checking in regularly, seeing how things are going and running regular webinars to pass on tips and guidance. They also hold regular team check-ins where everyone shares the feedback that they've been gathering from the communities.

Now the initial crisis is subsiding, what next?

Both FRRR and Justice Connect are focused on the long-term support that NFPs and communities will need to recover from this crisis. Encouragingly, they also believe that the pandemic could provide opportunities for beneficial long-term change.

Justice Connect is closely watching the data from its website to help it predict demand as well as lobby for positive regulatory change. One of the issues that continues to cause difficulties for NFPs during this crisis is moving their fundraising from face to face, to online. Even a donate button on the website of a small local charity means ‘crossing borders’ and having to comply with a whole raft of complex, state-based fundraising laws. This is one area where Sue is hoping they can successfully lobby for change:

“We want to support the NFP sector to build back better...What we can do is help to ensure that those who make it through this crisis come back stronger. We also want to help remove the barriers to bouncing back – the fundraising laws are absolutely part of this.”

From FRRR's perspective, Natalie is hoping that the pandemic will bring urban and rural Australia closer together:

"Now that everyone has had to work remotely there is a greater understanding about what rural and remote areas go through day-to-day. I hope this empathy doesn't disappear afterwards.

We've already seen some funding go to internet black spots in rural communities. People have realised you can't run businesses or telehealth if you don't have good internet...Hopefully businesses will also learn that now they have experienced working remotely, they can also employ people from rural Australia and it will offer new opportunities for these areas."

This is the abiding message from both organisations, this pandemic is nowhere near over, so they are looking at what's needed long term. In the early stages of the crisis both organisations adopted a consistent overall approach but with empathy and flexibility for individual circumstances. For Australia to navigate a positive path out of this pandemic, it's an approach we would do well to adopt.

* Justice Connect statistics. Based on 1:1 support NFP Law offered to NFPs via tailored legal information, phone advice or referrals for pro bono advice from 1 March – 13 May 2020 vs the same period in 2019.

► FURTHER READING - COVID-19

Visit our COVID-19 Insights Hub for economic and market updates to keep you informed as the situation evolves.