

Seeking feedback – asking questions, acting on the answers

(5 minute read)

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A version of the below first appeared on the Blog of the Environmental Funders Network. EFN is a UK-based network of foundations, family offices and individual donors supporting environmental causes, that aims to increase the amount of financial support for environmental causes and to improve its overall effectiveness.

Seeking honest and open feedback can be downright daunting. It is, on the face of it, always the right thing to do. However, there is a real art to seeking meaningful feedback that is easy to process and act upon. As funders, where should we begin?

Many of us will receive feedback on a day-to-day basis. The feedback will come from those we fund, those we have had to reject and our many peer stakeholders from across the trust and foundation sector and beyond. Often it will be full of praise – not surprising perhaps, given that we are in the business of giving money to others. Sometimes we may receive constructive criticism. Interwoven in this feedback may be the subtle suggestion that we aren't working as hard as we could to be the best possible funder – a funder that prioritises the needs of those it works with above its own needs. In receiving this feedback, do we as funders always recognise the power dynamics at play? It can feel precarious to criticise an organisation that you are reliant on funding from. Do we recognise the privilege we hold? For example, we benefit from an ability to plan, adapt and continuously improve over the long-term – a stability that is barely possible for those we fund.

It was with these questions and more, that in April 2020, the Foundation embarked on its first ever perception survey for grantees and applicants from the last three years. We asked nfpSynergy to administer the survey on our behalf – believing that this would enable us to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and so encourage honest feedback, as well as allow us to benchmark our results against the other eight funders* that have also conducted a survey through nfpSynergy. We will share the full findings of our survey on our website when they are available. The first stage of the research collected quantitative feedback through the survey (though there were many open comments too), and the second stage collected qualitative feedback using in-depth interviews with six grantees and four unsuccessful applicants.

In the spirit of transparency, we wanted to share the key pieces of feedback we received from the 361 (out of a possible 629) responses we received – of which 143 were grantees and 218 were unsuccessful applicants. The high response rate gives us a high degree of confidence in the how representative the results are. To summarise, respondents felt we were an approachable, human, flexible and professional funder that sought to support causes that many other funders won't – with our preference to offer core funding an additional bonus. Not everyone realised we are a small organisation of six staff, with three members of the team working on grants full-time – some respondents felt we were as large as funders like Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Our penchant for trying to understand the organisations we work with through our application process and grant management was praised highly. However, we have work to do to ensure that the decision times for our grants are better understood and explained, and reduced if possible – with 50% believing us to be quick in making decisions compared to 59% for the benchmark average.

Our application process was generally considered excellent or very good, and where pre-application advice was sought and received it was thought of as very helpful – although it was mentioned that not everyone realised pre-application advice was available, and in some cases pre-application advice had not been made available to those requesting it. 89% felt that the application was reasonable for the size of grant they were applying for, comparable to the benchmark average, but our inconsistency in offering verbal or written feedback for why we have rejected an application – especially at first stage – was seen as an area for clear improvement. Our applicants tend to spend more time applying for a grant from us than the benchmark average – but we feel that this could reflect the fact that we meet with applicants at second stage to inform our decision making.

A high proportion of grantees found reporting back on their grant ‘not difficult’, outperforming the benchmark average. However, 17% of grantees were interested in a closer working relationship with us (compared to 7% of the benchmark average).

There’s a lot for us to reflect on in our results. But already, some clear next steps are forming. Of utmost importance is how we ensure that seeking feedback isn’t a ‘one time’ thing. We will of course re-run this survey in the future, but we need to ensure that we create a safe and open environment in which those we fund and those applying to us feel empowered to tell us what they really think – the good, the bad and everything between. We also need to consider how we can make our grantmaking more transparent and consistent – ensuring that those that want pre-application advice, feedback or support receive it in a way that is feasible within a small staff team. From October onwards we have begun providing more detailed written feedback on reasons for rejecting an application at stage one, in response to the survey findings, and we hope to update our website soon with better guidance on when applications will be reviewed and decided upon in order to make it clear how long an application takes and to ensure we are more accountable if it looks like we have missed our own deadlines.

Undertaking a perception survey has been a worthwhile experience that I would recommend to all funders. In spite of Covid-19, we were surprised to receive such a high response rate to the survey of 57%, and we are grateful that organisations found up to 30 minutes to complete the survey. At times like these, when all around us feels uncertain, this research has provided us with some clarity about what we need to embed further in our work and what we must work on improving. It has given us space in which to reflect, listen and learn from our applicants and grantees – something that organisations struggle to do at the best of times – and provided us with ideas that we are confident about acting upon in order to be a better funder.

One final thing that our survey revealed is that not everyone understood who we were and what we stood for as an organisation – beyond what is articulated through our funding categories and guidelines. We hope that our decision to complete a perception survey and to commit to sharing our findings reveals something else about us as a funder...that we are an organisation committed to listening, learning and continuous improvement.

** The eight funders that make up the benchmark are the Lloyds Bank Foundation, Tudor Trust, the Wolfson Foundation, the Clothworkers’ Foundation, Cumbria Community Foundation, BBC Children in Need, the Nominet Trust and the People’s Postcode Lottery.*