

What comes next? Turning 50 and an ever-evolving normal, perhaps?

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I can recall saying words along the lines of 'roll on 2021' a fair amount last month. I didn't necessarily say this because I thought 2021 would be radically different to 2020 – more because there was a sense that positive change was coming. I am not sure I have yet to be proven right on this feeling after these last couple of weeks – we're unlikely to be able to forget those images of the attacks on the US Capitol or Free School Meal replacements any time soon.

We spent a lot of 2020 talking about a new normal, and I imagine that we will do the same in 2021. New normal is an odd phrase – deceptively simple, as if it is something that can be defined, designed and then applied, uniformly perhaps, across different groups. To my mind, it has a static quality, as if once you are in the new normal, that is where you remain. Instead, I believe that we are in an ever-evolving normal – one that is relentlessly focussed on constant change and loves the word unprecedented. In many ways though, isn't this exactly what life has always been like – without the Covid-19 pandemic, of course? Upon reflection, I think we can all see the ways in which we have been part of a world of unceasing and unprecedented change, that has ostensibly been about progress. The reality is perhaps better described as a lot of progress, with some inertia, some regression and some failures to recognise and redress key issues as effectively as we should have, like climate change, racism and poverty.

In January 2020, here at Ellerman, we were expecting change, primarily in the form of three of our six staff being new. Fast forward a year and we are expecting change again. Now it is the kind of change that is harder to define, especially in terms of how it will directly impact our work. Top of the list is the continuing uncertainty caused by Covid-19. Also on the list is how we can and must ensure the equitable distribution of our funding. Then there's the not so small matter of how we operate and communicate in a way that addresses the decreasing levels of confidence and trust from the public, the government and the wider charitable sector of the positive role that philanthropic organisations like us can fulfil in advancing the wellbeing of people, society and the natural world.

With all this in mind, in our first week back, we held a team planning session. A bold move perhaps, amidst all this uncertainty? I'd argue it was our best and only move! Coming together to plan and discuss what comes next matters in normal years, but it matters even more when you are working remotely and physically distanced from each other.

We began our meeting in 2021 by reflecting on the last 12 months – exploring what had worked and what hadn't. Overall, we felt that we had made a great deal of progress, in spite of factors – especially with regards to how we operate as a team and our operational processes. We have spent time thinking carefully about line management, our communications and our grantmaking processes and made changes accordingly, which has resulted in an empowered and open team culture and a greater commitment to continuous improvement. We're pleased that we have been able to work together so positively – despite the majority of the year involving remote working.

Our new [Investment Policy](#) that we wrote and published to our website last year was also a source of real pride for the team. The coming year is likely to be an important one for this Policy, as we start to establish how best to achieve the goals that we have set for ourselves within the Policy.

We've also improved our transparency in the last year, by publishing our grants data to [360Giving](#), updating our funding guidelines, sharing further information about our assessment timelines on our website and conducting a [Perception Survey](#) through nfpSynergy with our unsuccessful applicants and our grantees and sharing the results in full to our website. Our decision to collaborate with other funders and invest in Resourcing Racial Justice and join the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Data Group, has given us space and time in which to develop a DEI Accountability Plan as well, which we will deliver against in 2021.

And of course, a big part of the last year, was our response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which we designed very much in partnership with a range of stakeholders – primarily other funders and our grantees. As well as supporting our grantees, by showing more flexibility in terms of reporting requirements, payments and keeping in touch more regularly, and remaining open to new applications, we have tried to support the wider trust and foundation sector too, by actively engaging with the thinking that is happening right now.

One year ago, we never imagined that we would be working virtually and that we would still be able to appoint new fund managers, or complete our annual audit, or make great grants! Perhaps this year, we will be able to do more in person. Perhaps we won't. Either way, here at Ellerman that hasn't dampened down our hopes for the year ahead. In our team planning session, we concluded that in 2021, we hope that we will be able to –

- Continue to embed a continuous improvement culture within the team.
- Showcase and advocate for the people we work with and the causes that matter to our stakeholders and us, such as climate change, social action etc., by increasing our understanding of our stakeholders and their needs, which could include designing a deliverable funder plus offer and further refining our strategic communications work.
- Ensure that our processes and ways of working attract and include diverse stakeholders, and enable us to deliver our ambitious Investment Policy.

There's another reason why we are thinking about what the year ahead will hold for us. This year marks the 50th year since we were set up by our founder, Sir John Ellerman II in 1971. He passed away a few years after we were set up, and it's hard to say what he, and his wife Esther, would make of all that's happening around us right now. However, I am sure he would be pleased to see the ways in which the Foundation has been part of an ever-evolving normal in the last 50 years and contributed to some real progress through the grants that we have made.