

The future of the grant funding sector – better is possible

(4 minute read)

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This article is based on [nfpSynergy's](#) research titled 'The future of the grant funding sector', which was published on 22 July 2021.

Recently, nfpSynergy released a new piece of research titled 'The future of the grant funding sector'. The findings of this research related to feedback from interviews with the following leaders working within and alongside the UK's grantmaking sector:

1. James Banks, Chief Executive, London Funders
2. Ciorsdan Brown, Head of Charity Partnerships and Strategy, The Goldsmiths' Company
3. Ben Cairns, Director and Co-founder, IVAR (Institute for Voluntary Action Research)
4. Fiona Duncan, Chief Executive and Carolyn Sawyers, Deputy Chief Executive, Corra Foundation
5. Mubin Haq, CEO, Standard Life Foundation
6. Kristina Johansson, Director, Solberga Foundation
7. Sara Llewellyn, Chief Executive, Barrow Cadbury Trust
8. Florence Miller, Director, Environmental Funders Network
9. Husna Mortuza, Deputy Director, Advocacy and Public Engagement, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
10. Max Rutherford, Head of Policy, ACF (Association of Charitable Foundations)
11. Sharon Shea, Director of Portfolio, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
12. Paul Streets, Chief Executive, Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales.

The research came about as part of a partnership between John Ellerman Foundation and nfpSynergy. Since April 2020, nfpSynergy has worked with our applicants, our grantees, other grantmakers, our membership bodies and research consultancies to interrogate our grantmaking practices more deeply, and enact change where needed. We split this research project into three phases, with the findings of the first two phases available [here](#) on our website. This report relates to the third and final phase of this project.

We wanted to use the insights from the colleagues listed above to gain a deeper understanding of our role within the trust and foundation sector, as a medium-sized independent grantmaker with six staff operating in the arts, social action and environment sectors. Whilst conducting these interviews, it became clear that there were many insights that could be of use to the charitable funding sector more widely, hence the production of this external-facing report, which we are proud to promote and support.

Now, a title like 'The future of the grant funding sector' certainly is bold. Of course we know that a single report cannot predict the future in full. However, what nfpSynergy does offer in this report is a more radical exploration of oft-discussed topics within grantmaking, like transparency, accountability, risk-taking, collaboration and diversity, equity and inclusion, with the reflections often framed in the context of the climate and biodiversity crises, and society's likely long and arduous recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. This presents us with ideas and thinking that we are perhaps less familiar with, and results in powerful reflections on a range of matters, including the appropriateness of existing in perpetuity, the efficacy of our decision-making processes, the need for flexible and unrestricted funding, the role of grantmakers in supporting and/or delivering

campaigning work, and whether grantmakers are too institutionalised to respond effectively to the threats we face.

As grantmakers, we are urged, regardless of our size and approach to grantmaking, to engage with the issues raised. Some solutions are offered, like building trusting relationships within and across organisations, sectors and systems, and the need for grantmakers to invest time and resource into understanding the multi-layered contexts in which we operate. These are eminently sensible and, more importantly, achievable. However, what particularly resonated with me in this report is that we aren't provided with overly-simplistic or 'one size fits all' solutions. Ultimately we are encouraged to grapple with these difficult issues and to embrace disequilibrium.

The report expresses pessimism too about the level of change and progress that is possible in the next five years within the grantmaking sector. This pessimism is well-reasoned – there's plenty of evidence that grantmakers have been slow to act and respond to pressing issues. However, despite this pessimism, I was heartened to see that everyone interviewed was unanimous in their belief that better is possible.

In reading the report and seeing these reflections, I would say that I am feeling optimistic. Optimistic because leaders like those interviewed for this report exist, and they are clear in their belief that the grantmaking sector can deliver real and lasting change in response to the challenges and opportunities identified in this report, and that whatever we pass on to the next generation of leaders will be markedly better. Optimistic because since becoming Director of John Ellerman Foundation in January 2020, I have seen first-hand the ambition and commitment from the team and Trustees here to deliver positive changes to our funding processes and wider operations in order to be a better grantmaker.

I am very grateful to the leaders involved in this research for giving up their time to share their reflections. And a huge thanks to the nfpSynergy research team, led by Tim Harrison-Byrne, for all their work with us since April 2020, including this inspiring report.

Tim Harrison-Byrne and Rosie Burrells, the report authors, have also reflected on the report in a blog that they have written for the nfpSynergy website [here](#). I hope you do go on to read the full report, and I look forward to reading your reflections on the report on Twitter or similar.