

Using our voice - Why we joined the Living Wage campaign (4 minute read)

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As grantmakers, we often consider the value we can offer beyond the funding we distribute through grants. Here at John Ellerman Foundation, the [articles](#) we share on a monthly basis demonstrate some of our thinking in relation to this, whether it's commissioning research on the future of the grantmaking sector, considering how to do good through our endowment and the way it is invested, or trying to increase the levels of environmental grantmaking and philanthropy in the UK Overseas Territories.

At John Ellerman Foundation our endowment affords us the privilege of being able to operate both independently and in the long-term. One of the ways we have been trying to build upon these assets is by publicly supporting joint letters, statements or pledges that relate to the work we do. Whilst the efficacy and impact of such work is hard to determine precisely; personally and professionally we can all speak to petitions, pledges and similar that have made a positive difference to our lives and the lives of others.

Since I joined John Ellerman Foundation in January 2020, we have signed up to communications and pledges relating to the #NeverMoreNeeded and #WeStandWithTheSector Covid-19 related campaigns. We have signed up to the Open and Trusting Grantmaking pledge coordinated by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research. We also joined the Funder Commitment on Climate Change in December 2019.

In May this year, we sought Board approval for a clearer process through which we could use our voice in support of initiatives like joint letters, statements or pledges. This resulted in the Board agreeing the following principles that must be met in order for us to consider adding our support:

- There is an evidenced need for the statement, letter or pledge, e.g. there is a problem that it is seeking to address, and we feel the response presented is constructive, purposeful and non-performative.
- It relates to our organisational aim and one or more of our funding categories.
- It has been designed by a trusted source, and this could include our direct involvement.
- It does not contradict our organisational values or anything else that we have supported recently.
- It offers an opportunity for us to make positive use of our non-monetary assets, such as our independence and cross-sectoral influence and reach.
- It offers public support that will be useful to our stakeholder groups, namely grantees, prospective applicants and fellow funders.
- It will enhance our own internal learning and practice.

Our first use of the aforementioned principles and process related to the decision we took in July to become a [Living Wage Employer](#) and [Living Wage Funder](#). By way of overview, the Living

Wage, which is also sometimes called the real Living Wage, and is always written with a capital 'L' and 'W', is not to be confused with the Government's living wage. It is calculated annually, with new rates announced every November, and it is based on the cost of living. The current rates are £9.50 per hour in the UK and £10.85 per hour in London.

It is voluntarily paid by over 7,000 UK employers working across the private, public and charitable sectors. The Living Wage was set up to tackle in work poverty, and began as a campaign in East London within Citizens UK. As well as benefitting society, it also supports businesses in terms of improving their reputation, increasing motivation and retention of employees, helping organisations to differentiate themselves from others and improving staff relations.

The initiative also includes the option for charitable funders to become a Living Wage Funder. There are 52 Living Wage Funders currently – many are independent like us, but the group includes public funders too. To become a Living Wage Funder, you need to complete the following three steps:

1. Become a Living Wage accredited employer
2. Pay the Living Wage to grant funded posts or work towards this
3. Support grantees to become Living Wage accredited.

The Living Wage campaign has a positive track record of creating lasting impact, and we hope that our support will only add to this. Signing up allows us to improve our own internal grantmaking practices too, and it aligns well with anti-poverty work that we support through some of our social action funding.

As grantmakers we often debate how to use our voice in ways that are well informed and not overtly political. We discuss how to use our voice without attracting the ire of others, and without centring ourselves at the expense of those we support through our work. As a generalist and responsive grantmaker, with an overarching aim to advance the wellbeing of people, society and the natural world, there are a huge number of issues and concerns that we could be speaking out about. Some will very sensibly argue that we should simply let the grants we make do the talking for us. Valid concerns might be raised that participating in collective actions like joint statements, letters or pledges may result in the nuances of our own stance becoming lost. One could easily argue that it might be easier to say nothing at all, for fear of the perceived (and real) barriers and pitfalls.

In May this year our Board debated these whys and wherefores. They concluded that against a backdrop of multiple inequities and harms at a societal, economic and environmental level it is essential that we do use our voice, in addition to all that we do through our grantmaking and our investing. We know that there's a risk that we won't always get it right, but we will always be clear on our reason for speaking up and speaking out in the first place and are very open to feedback about how we can use our voice more effectively.