

The John Ellerman Foundation Grantee and Unsuccessful Applicant Perceptions Audit 2020

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Introduction

At the start of 2020, John Ellerman Foundation commissioned nfpSynergy to carry out a grantee and unsuccessful applicant perception audit. The aim of the research was to better understand how applicants viewed their relationship with the Foundation, its grant making processes and ultimately where it could improve. The research was carried out in two phases. The first phase consisted of a survey of John Ellerman Foundation grantees and unsuccessful applicants. For the second phase, we interviewed six grantees and four unsuccessful applicants to dig deeper into the findings from the survey.

Fieldwork for the first phase of the research started around two months after lockdown measures had been introduced by the UK Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the research additionally sought to explore the experiences of grantees and unsuccessful applicants throughout these difficult months. The second phase of the research, which was carried out after many lockdown measures had been lifted, also explored the interviewees' experiences of how funders had responded to the pandemic, as well as their perceptions and expectations as to whether funders should change the way they work in the future.

Objectives and methodology

The objectives of the research were to:

1. Understand and benchmark applicants' perceptions of the John Ellerman Foundation, and their experiences of the Foundation's application process
2. Find out how grantees rate their relationship with John Ellerman Foundation and what applicants consider an ideal relationship with a funder to look like
3. Evaluate unsuccessful applicants' experiences of feedback they received on their application and
4. Review areas where John Ellerman Foundation can improve
5. Learn about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on grantees and unsuccessful applicants, as well as their perceptions regarding the need for a changing landscape in grant-making due to the pandemic.

The research was carried out in two phases. The first phase consisted of an online survey with grantees and unsuccessful applicants, which took place between the 11th May and 5th June 2020.

- 361 out of the 629 charities the survey was sent to responded and completed the survey (approximately 57% response rate). 143 of the 361 survey completions were from grantees and 218 were from unsuccessful applicants.
- The survey was sent to 185 grantees and 444 unsuccessful applicants, meaning the response rate for grantees was 77% and for unsuccessful applicants it was 49%. This was one of the highest response rates we have had in all our rounds of research with funders.
- Grantees were defined as having been successful with their most recent grant application; unsuccessful applicants as those who were unsuccessful.
- We have included a 'benchmark average' based on research conducted with the grantees and unsuccessful applicants from 8 funding organisations. The sample size for the grant maker average is approximately 5200. The sample size for the benchmark average can vary according to the question.
- The eight funders that make up the benchmark are the Lloyds Bank Foundation England and Wales, Tudor Trust, the Wolfson Foundation, the Clothworkers' Foundation, Cumbria Community Foundation, BBC Children in Need, the Nominet Trust and the People's Postcode Lottery.

The second phase involved telephone interviews with grantees and unsuccessful applicants. For this stage of the research, nfpSynergy interviewed six grantees and four unsuccessful applicants between 11th August and 4th September 2020. There was a particular focus on the following:

- Understanding what is important for grantees in their relationship with the John Ellerman Foundation and other funders
- Exploring which level and nature of feedback unsuccessful applicants consider most helpful for the development of projects and future applications
- Learning about grantees' and unsuccessful applicants' experience and perceptions of emergency grant funding and about whether they have changed their perspectives on funding

The profile of the 10 interviewees is broken down as follows:

PROFILE OF PHASE 2 PARTICIPANTS	
Grant stream	Number of interviews
Arts	2
Museums & Galleries	2
Social Action	3
Environment	3
Grantee / Unsuccessful Applicant	
Grantee	6
Unsuccessful Applicant	4
Income	
£50k - £100k	1
£101k - £250k	1
£251k - £500k	4
£501k - £1m	2
£1m – £5m	1
£5m - £10m	1

Summary of key findings

1. John Ellerman Foundation perceived as a professional and flexible funder, but scores slightly below the benchmark on some measures

Grantees and unsuccessful applicants value the John Ellerman Foundation as an established and professional funder. You are seen to have efficient processes and policies, and are flexible when it comes to funding areas and understanding grantees' needs when their circumstances change. However, the Foundation scored below the nfpSynergy benchmark with grantees on being treated as partners and decision times for grants.

Unsuccessful applicants were less satisfied with the Foundation than grantees but more positive than the nfpSynergy benchmark.

2. Application process

Your application process is rated very highly. The majority of applicants (52%) rated the process excellent or very good, with grantees more positive than unsuccessful applicants. Almost 90% found the process reasonable for the size of grant they were applying for, and there were many comments praising the simple two stage approach, the guidance on the website and not having to jump through too many hurdles. Where the Foundation could improve is in making quicker decisions on funding requests. Half of applicants considered the decision to be very or quite quick, compared for 59% in the benchmark.

3. Positive experience of personal interactions with staff, though consistency can be improved

Personal contact with John Ellerman Foundation staff is incredibly valuable, especially before the submission of an application. Some grantees described how this input strengthened their application, but others (mainly unsuccessful applicants) mentioned that they did not receive this level of support. Grantees valued grant managers' approachability after grants had been awarded, but some also mentioned interest in more contact with the Foundation and a two-way relationship that is driven by grantees as well as the Foundation.

4. More feedback would be appreciated, even if it is basic

Unsuccessful applicants expressed a desire for more feedback on their rejected applications. Almost 40% of unsuccessful applicants were unsure as to why their application was declined, and 37% said they did not receive any feedback but would have found it useful. In terms of which sort of feedback would be welcomed, unsuccessful applicants indicated that feedback encouraging decisions on how to proceed (e.g. reapply or not) would be very appreciated, even if it is minimal.

5. Majority perceived funders as responsive the coronavirus pandemic, but many have been negatively impacted and are worried about the future

81% of John Ellerman Foundation applicants have seen their income fall during the pandemic. 70% say their staff are anxious about the current situation. The situation for applicants is tough, but John Ellerman Foundation has responded positively by being flexible. Many organisations are concerned that the emergency funding offered this year will reduce the amount of money that is available in the future. Any reassurances you can offer in this area would be appreciated.

In-depth findings

John Ellerman Foundation generally perceived as a professional but flexible funder

The Foundation is highly thought of, though scores slightly below benchmark on some measures

Throughout the survey and the interviews, it was clear that the majority of applicants had a very positive perception of John Ellerman Foundation and the way it approaches grant making. Applicants commented on the Foundation as an established and professional funder, but with an approachable and human side to the organisation. There were also comments about the Foundation being collaborative with efficient processes and policies.

*"You've a great reputation, one of the go-to funders, prepared to take risks, long **established**, respectable, **approachable**."*(Health and disability, £101-250k, Unsuccessful – survey)

*"Working with John Ellerman is more like **working with family than working with big business**, and that's a good thing."*(Grantee, Environment, £251-500k)

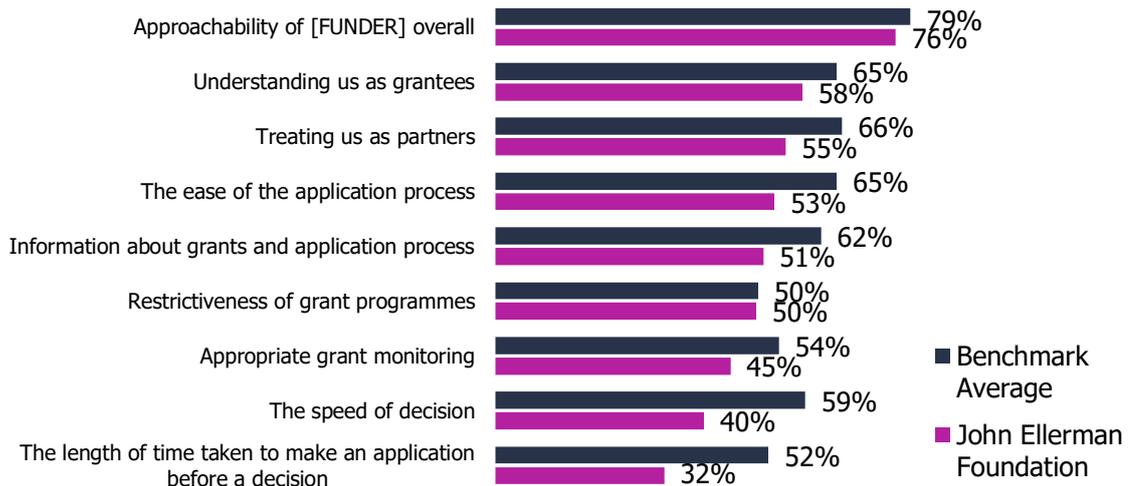
*"A large foundation that is well resourced and well structured, with **efficient processes** and highly developed grant giving policies."*(Health and disability, £5-10m, Unsuccessful – survey)

*"Clearly the foundation **takes its responsibilities very seriously** and adheres to the criteria it has set for funding distribution."*(Health and disability, £1-5m, Unsuccessful – survey)

These perceptions were also reflected in the applicants' survey ratings when they were asked to compare their experiences with the John Ellerman Foundation and the experiences they had had with other grant-makers (see Figures 1 and 2). 76% of grantees said the John Ellerman Foundation was more approachable than other funders, 58% of grantees felt that the John Ellerman Foundation understood them better than other grant makers, and 55% of grantees felt the John Ellerman Foundation were better at treating them as partners than other funders.

With regard to the application process, however, a lower percentage of grantees felt that the John Ellerman Foundation performed better than other grant-makers. For example, only 40% of grantees said that the John Ellerman Foundation was faster in making decisions than other funders. In addition, the John Ellerman Foundation scores below our benchmark with grantees. This is especially true for statements on the application process. For example, 59% of grantees rated their respective benchmark funder as being faster than other funders in making decisions, 19% more than the 40% of John Ellerman grantees. For the statement 'Treating us as partners', 66% of benchmark grantees were more satisfied with their respective benchmark funders than with other funders compared to 55% for John Ellerman grantees (see ratings in Figure 1). Both topics, the Foundation's application process and relationship with grantees, will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

Figure 1: Grantees’ perceptions of John Ellerman Foundation



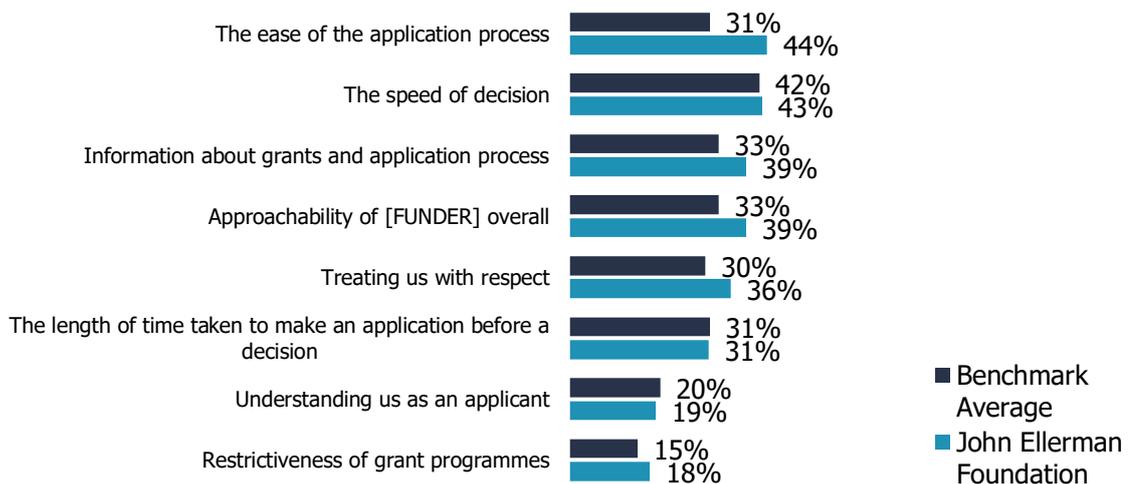
“When you think about your experience of applying for and getting a grant with John Ellerman Foundation how would you say they compare with other grant-makers?” – **Much better + Better**

Base: 141-143 grantees | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and Base: ~3,300 grantees across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

Unsuccessful applicants (Figure 2) generally gave lower ratings when asked to compare the John Ellerman Foundation to other grant-makers – a perception shared by unsuccessful applicants throughout the benchmark. Grantees are far more likely to be positive about their funder than those who were not successful in their application. For example, 39% of unsuccessful applicants perceived the John Ellerman Foundation as more approachable than other funders (compared to 76% for grantees), and only 19% of unsuccessful applicants felt the John Ellerman Foundation was better at understanding them than other funders.

With regard to the application process, grantees’ and unsuccessful applicants’ ratings are more aligned. 44% of unsuccessful applicants vs 53% of grantees said the Foundation’s ease of the application process was better than with other funders, and a higher percentage of unsuccessful applicants (43%) were satisfied with the Foundation’s speed of decision compared to grantees (40%).

Figure 2: Unsuccessful applicants’ perceptions of John Ellerman Foundation



“When you think about your experience of applying for and NOT getting a grant with John Ellerman Foundation how would you say they compare with other grant-makers?” – **Much better + Better**

Base: 214-216 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and Base: ~1,900 unsuccessful applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

Figure 2 does however show that John Ellerman Foundation is perceived more favourably by unsuccessful applicants than the nfpSynergy benchmark average. 44% rated the ease of the Foundation's application process as better than those of other funders (compared to 31% of unsuccessful benchmark applicants). In addition, John Ellerman Foundation outperforms the benchmark average on approachability (39% vs 33%) and on respect (36% vs 30%). These are impressive findings, though it is again worth bearing in mind that around 80% of unsuccessful applicants were rejected at first stage, hence perhaps the high score for the ease of application process.

The Foundation's flexibility and effort to understand applicants and their circumstances are especially valued by applicants

While the first phase of the research focused on how the Foundation was rated by applicants and how it compared to other funders, the telephone interviews during the second phase of the research provided the opportunity to explore applicants' perceptions of the Foundation in greater detail. Throughout the survey and the interviews, we found that applicants appreciated the Foundation's flexibility. In particular, applicants mentioned their gratitude for the Foundation's willingness to fund areas that other grant makers would not (e.g. core funding, funding overseas territories, etc.). In addition, applicants greatly valued your effort to understand their work and its impact when making a decision on funding proposals. They described how other funders made these decisions based on areas of interest that suit the funder's profile but are often too narrow to represent all the areas where the charity's work is needed. John Ellerman Foundation, however, was mentioned as an organisation that *"identifies niches / specific areas where it can make a difference in the sectors it supports"* (Environment, £101-250k, Grantee – survey), more comments on this topic are included below.

*"They also support UK overseas territories which is quite unusual, and it is really important. **I also know that from a funding perspective, they support core funding which is great. There are very few charities that will do that;** a lot of foundations don't like to support salary and John Ellerman really stands out to me, because you can put in for salary cost as long as obviously you can justify it."* (Unsuccessful applicant, Environment, £1-5m)

*"It comes to the words I keep using, which is respect and being modest and **wanting to focus on the work, not the profile of the funder.** All too often the profile of the funder and the funder's own objectives can hinder the delivery of the work that actually needs to be done, and that is not the case with John Ellerman."* (Grantee, Environment, £251-500k)

*"John Ellerman is one of the very few that **isn't too prescriptive about what it'll fund.** So Clothworkers; on their website they say, 'These are our areas of interest', and they're interested in mental health, social policy, offending, homelessness, domestic violence, obviously the other bigger things like trafficking and things like that. Lots of them all say that but, and they wouldn't entertain funding us. Most people who are affected by mental health, isolation financial instability, it's as a result of family breakdown. It's exacerbated by family breakdown and the instability that that creates; but **we don't neatly fit into their idea of what social isolation is.**"* (Grantee, Social Action, £501k-1m)

Grantees also gave examples around your flexibility after grants had been awarded. Those examples covered the Foundation's response to the coronavirus pandemic but also periods unrelated to the pandemic when charities found themselves in difficult circumstances and John Ellerman Foundation was very willing to offer solutions. Grantees described these reactions as a great benefit, saving them time and money and enabling them to spend the grant to the best effect (see examples below).

*"I appointed somebody to be the IT manager, and he had a breakdown and went off sick. After a period of time he decided to resign, and that was that; we just had to wait and see. [...] I told John Ellerman about this, and **they just said, 'Do you want to delay the second payment?'** Which was great, because then once he'd resigned and I'd recruited, **I hadn't wasted 5 months of the funding.**" (Grantee, Social Action, £501k–1m)*

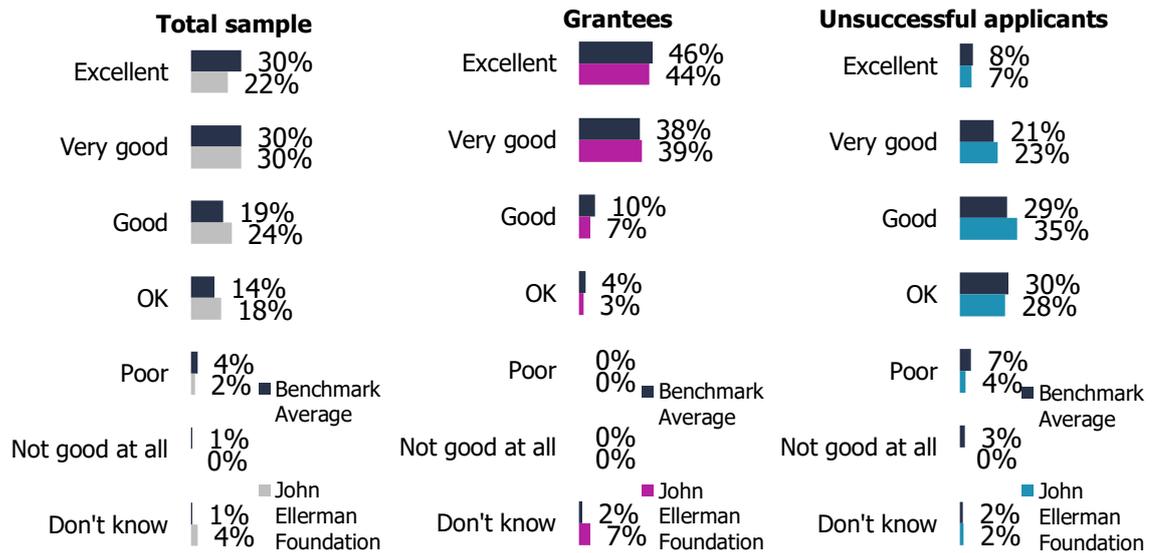
*"Particularly now in this year with the pandemic, the support that I wanted was for the John Ellerman Foundation to say, **'Yes, we can understand why you want to reshape this project, because the world has changed beyond recognition from when you applied. Yes, you can do what you want to do'**. That support was very important; it would be nice to have that in writing as well, but it was really important and very valuable at the time." (Grantee, Museums & Galleries, £251-500k)*

Application process is perceived positively

Application process perceived as straightforward and proportionate

The majority of John Ellerman applicants (52%) rated the Foundation’s application process as either excellent or very good. As is the case with the nfpSynergy benchmark, grantees had a more positive impression of the process than unsuccessful applicants – 83% rate it as excellent or very good compared to 30% for unsuccessful applicants. Unsuccessful applicants were slightly more positive about the application process than the benchmark, this is likely because a large proportion were rejected at the first stage.

Figure 3: Rating of the John Ellerman Foundation’s application process by grantees vs unsuccessful applicants

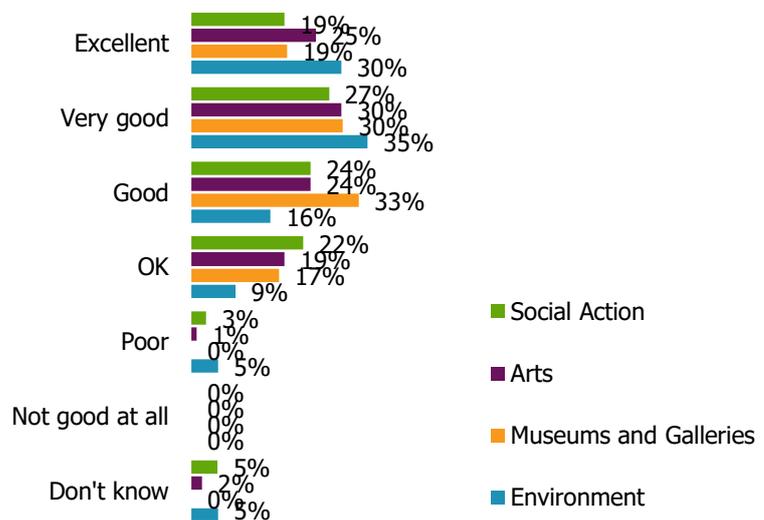


“How would you rate your experience of the application process?”

Base: 143 grantees & 218 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and Base: ~2,800 grantees & ~1,5000 unsuccessful applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

Nearly two thirds of those applying to the Environment programme rate the application process as very good or excellent – this most positive rating of all the grant programmes. Those applying to the Social Action stream were less positive (only 46% giving the process excellent or very good) and were the most likely to rate the process as OK or poor (25%).

Figure 4: Rating of the John Ellerman Foundation’s application process by funding programme



“How would you rate your experience of the application process?”
 Base: 361 applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy

The application process is reasonable for the amount applicants applying for

On average applicants took longer to complete a John Ellerman Foundation application than the benchmark. We do need to treat this data with some caution as it is based on those who said that they spent time on each stage of the application. For example, 84% of applicants did not have an assessment meeting, but for those who did, on average they spent seven hours on this stage of the application. It is important therefore to look at the full breakdown of this data in the PowerPoint report.

However, using the averages in Table 1 below, they show that grantees spent more time on applications than unsuccessful applicants. The most time intensive stage was developing the funding proposal, followed by completing the application and assembling evidence and information.

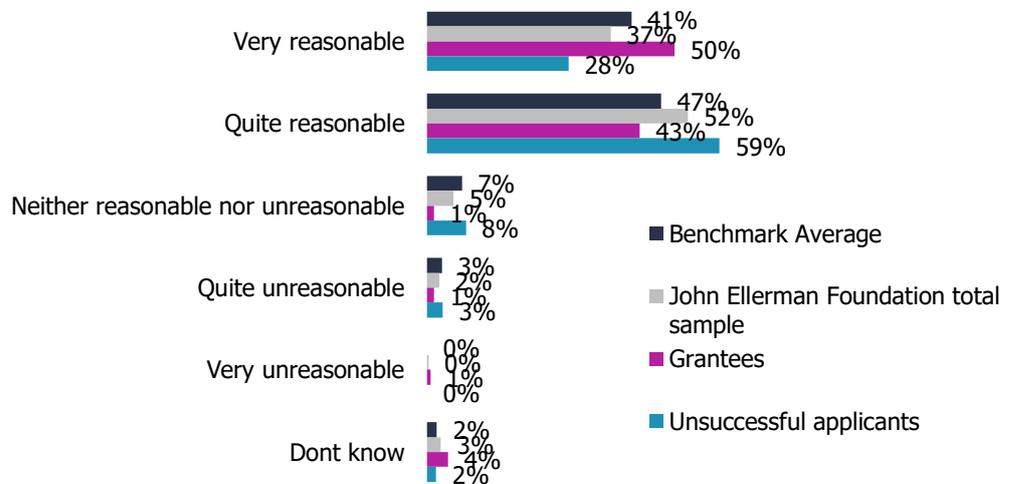
Table 1: Grantees spending more time on application than unsuccessful applicants

Full sample	Register enquiry	Phone contact	Assembling evidence and information	Developing funding proposal	Assessment visit	Completing application	Post application clarifications and follow up	TOTAL (Hours)
John Ellerman Foundation 2020	1.9	1.4	11.2	17.4	7.0	11.8	4.3	55
Benchmark average	1.4	1.2	12.1	13.5	4.3	11.8	4.0	48.3
Grantee/applicant								
Grantees	2.6	1.8	14.1	21.4	7.3	14.0	5.8	67
Unsuccessful Applicants	1.5	0.9	9.3	14.9	6.0	9.9	2.2	44.7

How many hours would you estimate you spent on the following aspects of your funding request / grant application to John Ellerman Foundation?
 Base: ~ 5,200 applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: John Ellerman Foundation survey May-June 20, nfpSynergy

In spite of what appear to be a high number of hours invested into the application, 89% of applicants considered the application process to be reasonable for the size of grant they were applying for. Unsuccessful applicants were not as positive as grantees (93%), but even so 86% still said the process was very or quite reasonable.

Figure 5: Reasonableness of John Ellerman Foundation's application process when considering size of grant by grantees vs unsuccessful applicants



"How reasonable did the application process feel for the size of grant you were applying for?"

Base: 143 grantees & 218 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and
Base: ~1,500 applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

Many applicants appreciated what they saw as the effort the Foundation had gone to in making the application process as straightforward as possible. The two stage process and allowing applicants to articulate their project in their own words were praised by some, however one larger charity spoke of finding it very difficult to fit how much their organisation does into two pages.

*"I think especially for the amount of money that is given, **it's not too much of an in-depth application.** It's just always so welcome; just compare it to the NHLF funding for example, or the Arts Council; it's a huge amount of online forms where lots and lots of details need to be resourced, or in particular when the charity or the grant giving foundation's own templates need to be filled out. We have our accounts for the last three years, but when you have to then take all that information and put it into another form in order to upload that form, instead of being able to use your own, **that is the sort of thing that can start feeling really tedious and a bit of a waste of time.** I'm the only member of staff at my charity, so to do these applications, I have to be really certain that I've got a) enough time to actually apply in the first place, b) that we've got a good chance of getting the money. So to see something that is so straightforward, **that you can just put a PDF, your latest charities commission, published accounts, rather than have to fill in a lot of different forms, it's really very welcome.**" (Unsuccessful applicant, Museums & Galleries, £101-250k)*

*"The nub of the application was pretty free flow, which was **helpful because that allowed us to articulate our story** in the way that we wanted to articulate it, rather than a structure that had been determined by the funder." (Grantee, Museums & Galleries, £251-500k)*

"I think that when it comes to large organisations like ours; we're much smaller but we operate in the same way that Save The Children would operate, which is that we have many programs across

*the UK and they're all linked to a specific aim, but they might all be very different. To write what the organisation does - especially if you're looking for core support for the infrastructure that holds your organisation together - **I think that it's almost impossible to write that in two pages**, so what happens is that you're forced to ask for a specific element of your project because it's a thing that people can visualise.”(Unsuccessful applicant, Social Action, £5-10m)*

Willingness to understand applicants appreciated (esp. during trustee visit)

Those that had the opportunity to meet or talk to a member of staff ahead of submitting their application often found this experience incredibly valuable. Applicants were impressed by how Foundation staff really tried to understand their organisation and how they could fit into a funding programme. The second stage trustee visit was also positively perceived– another chance to ‘sell yourself’ – but also another opportunity for applicants to better understand the Foundation. There was however one negative experience of a trustee visit, where the applicant raised concerns around guidance for preparation, felt they had their experience and qualifications questioned, and also queried diversity.

*“The application process and the pre-application process was definitely really positive; I would say definitely one of the best application processes, in the sense of the ability **to have a meeting and then to put in an application**. Then to have as part of the application process, to have an interview at our office with someone else; both of those meetings felt they were people **really trying to understand us as an organisation, and how we fitted into the social action program**.”(Grantee, Social Action, £251-500k)*

*“Because they take the time. You get the **opportunity to talk to intelligent people who take the time to understand you, and the broader issues**, because I think the second phase of the application process was that I met with Nicola and one of the trustees. It was like a second interview kind of thing, and they asked searching intelligent questions; you got a genuine feeling they wanted to make sure that they had understood what they were considering funding.”(Grantee, Environment, £50-100k)*

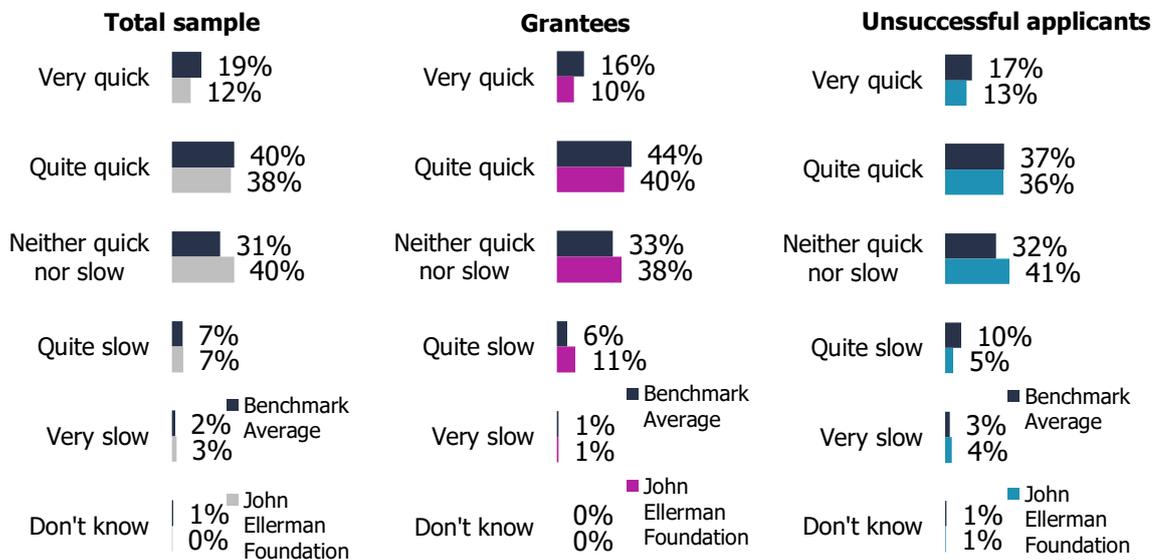
*“It's interesting - especially now when people are really having to respond to diversity in a robust way, I have a slight feeling that I'm a white woman, but I'm from a working class background. **I don't know if the trustees have a bigger representation**, I'm asked questions like, 'Have you got a formal management qualification?' Well, I've developed an organisation over 20 years. **It felt really patronising**.”(Unsuccessful applicant, £251-500k)*

Decision making could be quicker

One area of the application process that John Ellerman Foundation could improve is the decision time on funding requests. Although most felt the turnaround times were fine, there were comments in both the survey and in the telephone interviews that they felt they had to wait too long for a decision. Figure 6 shows that 50% of John Ellerman Foundation applicants believe the turnaround time was very quick or quite quick. However, the benchmark equivalent for this figure is 59%.

"I can't quite see why John Ellerman's process is so long, because the first stage is a minimum of 10 week, and then you go into the second stage and I think it says in the guidelines, **'Don't start your project eight months before.'** If you're dealing with quite immediate need; you've found the problem within a community, especially if you're looking at something quite high pressured like domestic violence. Often it's, **'We need to put a resource there; we don't have that; we need to apply to a funder to get that done as quickly as possible.'** That rules out John Ellerman."
 (Unsuccessful applicant, Social Action, £5-10m)

Figure 6: Speed of decision by grantees vs unsuccessful applicants



"Would you consider this to be ...?"

Base: 118 grantees & 195 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and Base: ~2,600 grantees & ~1,400 unsuccessful applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

One unsuccessful applicant spoke of the importance of communication when waiting for a decision to be made on a grant application. This was an area where one grantee thought John Ellerman Foundation performed very well.

"I think that was maybe a couple of months. [...] I remember not feeling that it was taking a particularly long time, definitely not. I remember that the deadline was advertised from the beginning; [...] **If they're planning to change anything, I think that it is crucial to really clearly outline a time frame from the beginning.** So as an organisation, if you think, "We can't wait till February", then you wouldn't waste your time doing the application." (Unsuccessful applicant, Museums & Galleries, £101-250k)

"It was very clear up front when the decision would be made. We were kept informed as to whether any further information was required." (Grantee, Museums & Galleries, £251-500k)

Positive experiences of direct communications with staff, though consistency can be improved

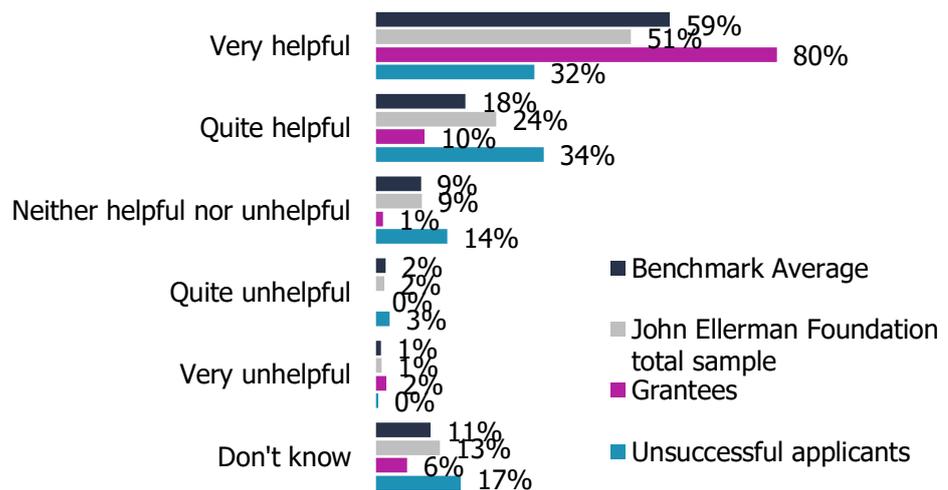
When communication with staff occurs, it is perceived as very helpful

Throughout the survey and the interviews, many applicants mentioned that personal contact with John Ellerman Foundation staff hugely benefitted their organisations and applications. One interviewee explained how a meeting with a staff member helped their charity consider strategic decisions, which strengthened their application.

"They're lovely to work with, but that's very much down to the people and the personality. I think that had we not had the opportunity and the suggestion of Dorothée to restructure our application, to really think about where are we going as a museum, we might have prevaricated for another few years. What it has did kick-start in terms of strategy is the strategic change that we are well embarked on now." (Grantee, Museums & Galleries, £251-500k)

Survey results (see Figure 7) reflect these positive experiences. 75% of applicants felt the Foundation's staff were approachable and helpful while working on their application, which is similar to the benchmark average at 77%. However, when comparing grantees' and unsuccessful applicants' ratings, differences emerge: 90% of grantees were satisfied with staff approachability, but only 66% of unsuccessful applicants. Instead, 14% of unsuccessful applicants said John Ellerman staff was 'neither helpful nor unhelpful' (compared to only 1% of grantees).

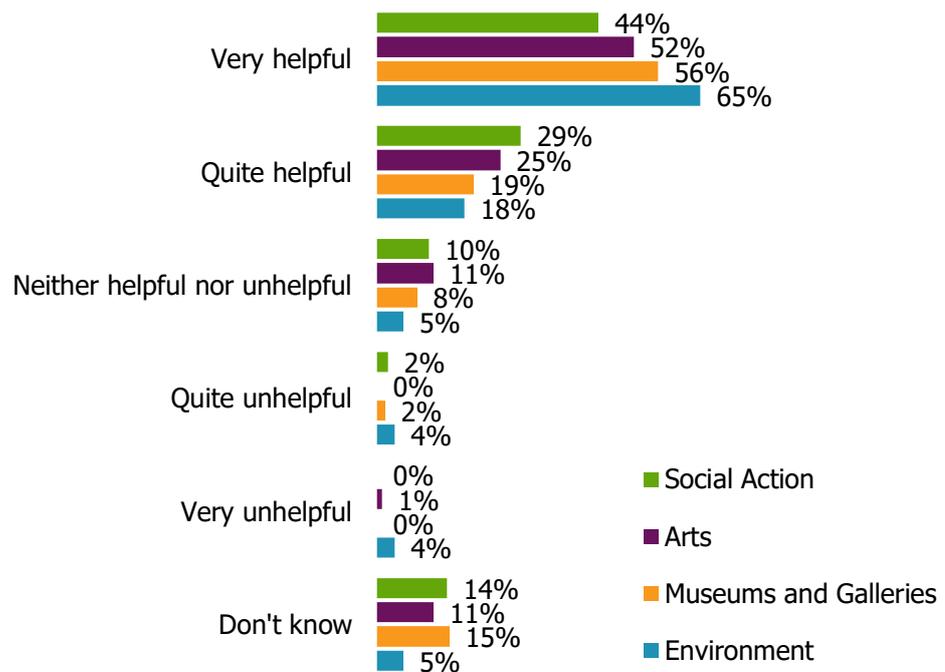
Figure 7: Approachability of John Ellerman Foundation staff during the application process by grantees vs unsuccessful applicants



"How approachable and helpful were the John Ellerman Foundation staff while making your application?"
 Base: 143 grantees & 217 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and
 Base: ~3,700 applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

Comparing the different grant streams (see Figure 8) also shows that not all applicants had similar experiences. While 65% of applicants to the Environment programme rated staff as 'very helpful', the figure was lower for all other grant streams, with the lowest ratings from applicants to the Social Action programme (44%).

Figure 8: Approachability of John Ellerman Foundation staff during the application process by funding programme



"How approachable and helpful were the John Ellerman Foundation staff while making your application?"
Base: 360 applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy

Comments made by survey respondents and interviewees confirm that assumption. Not all applicants had the opportunity to receive feedback on their ideas before submitting their application. Those who did not were either not able to speak to any staff member or were referred to the guidelines. In addition, those unsuccessful applicants commented how helpful speaking to someone would have been to introduce their organisation and find out whether they should apply at all (comments below). These comments seem very plausible, especially when considering how highly grantees spoke of the pre-application interactions they had with John Ellerman Foundation staff.

*"The earlier stages of the application process could include **more contact time with JEF staff to help** organisations begin their application, ensuring they are not applying for something that JEF will not be able to fund."*(Arts, £1-5m, Unsuccessful – survey)

"What I would say is that there is no room to interact with anybody. I understand they get an awful lot of applications, many people who don't have the criteria at all. If it was me, the grant process in general doesn't give you much opportunity to express who you are or those complexities of application might be relevant, because they hit the criteria but it's not nearly as sometimes as straightforward."(Unsuccessful, Environment, £1-5m)

*"I'm pretty sure with John Ellerman I called. First of all, to actually get someone to speak to me was a bit challenging, and then when I did it was pretty much, **'You have to refer back to the guidelines'**. There was no one in the higher up level that I could speak to about the organisation and do that introduction; which is fine, because that's the same as Garfield Weston. If you don't have a relationship with them already; Esmee Fairbairn are better, actually."*(Unsuccessful applicant, Social Action, £5-10m)

One unsuccessful applicant described the benefits of personal contact before submitting an application for charities and the grant-maker using the procedure applied by the National Lottery as an example:

*"First of all, you can call before you even put in the first application; you can speak to a grant manager, but also you speak to a regional grant manager as well. [...] They know pretty much everything that's going on, and **they're able to pick apart anything in a conversation or question your statistics.** You then put in what probably works out to be about three or four pages, just to talk about the project; maybe not even as much as that, but actually you've already had the context of your organisation and what you're doing through that conversation. When you submit to the portal; that then goes direct; if it's not national and it's to a specific area, that application goes direct right back to that officer - so it's going directly back to the person that you've already had conversations with - and then they come back and they ask you more questions about the project. You pretty much know in that second conversation after you've answered more questions, whether you're going to go through or not; or whether actually you have to take time and look at your plans to see whether it does fit the guidelines. [...] There's more of a relationship there with Lottery; but I don't know what they spent on their infrastructure, how much money they spent on being able and pay that amount of attention. **It seems to me that with a conversation in the beginning, it would be less on the administration for everyone** - for Lottery and also charities having to write an application as well - because of that personal contact." (Unsuccessful, Social Action, £5-10m)*

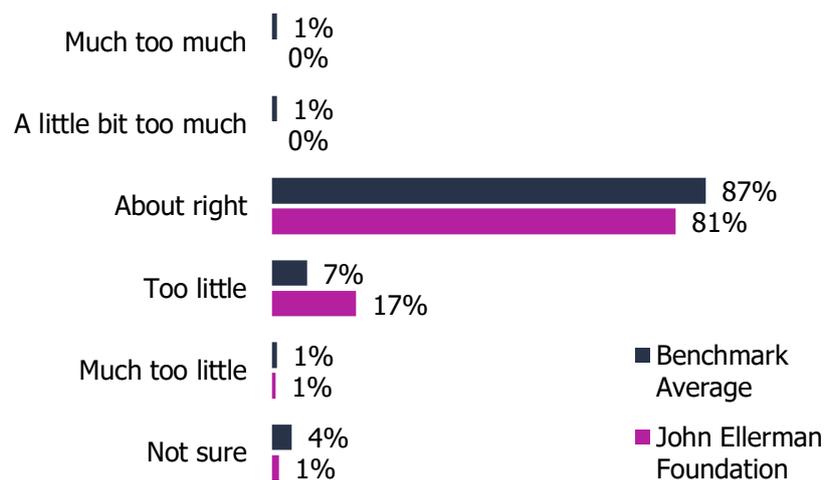
Grantees value the Foundation's hands-off approach, but some interest in more contact initiated by the Foundation

Grantees also spoke very positively about their relationship with Foundation after they received their grant. 90% said the staff member managing their grant was approachable and helpful. Grantees mentioned that the Foundation was welcoming and very focussed on the work of grantees.

*"They're very hands-off which is not a bad thing. They're not constantly asking for updates; they're not constantly asking for profile. In the past we've been the ones saying, 'Do you want your logo on this?', and their position has always been, 'if it's of help'. So I would say as a funder, **they're very, very modest.** Some funders want their logo up front, central, bigger than everything else; that's not the John Ellerman Foundation. **I find them very much about just the delivery of the work; and I mean this genuinely, we have nothing but positive experiences here.**" (Grantee, Environment, £251-500k)*

*"I believe the team are well aware of their grantees, so I've always felt that I have been known and our projects and organisation has been known to those staff members that I work with. When I see Dorothee at different meetings, **she's always very welcoming as well;** I understand she knows who her grantees are, which I like. We're not faceless." (Grantee, Environment, £251-500k)*

However, survey results also showed that 17% of grantees were interested in more contact with the Foundation – a figure that is higher than the benchmark average at 7% (see Figure 9) and a perception that was mentioned throughout the survey and interviews. While few mentioned details, such as an interest in visits by the Foundation, many would appreciate more clarity on the Foundation's expectations regarding communication, and a two-way relationship, that is also driven by the Foundation (see quotes below).

Figure 9: Grantees' perceptions of contact with the John Ellerman Foundation

"As a grantee, how much contact do you have with John Ellerman Foundation?"

Base: 142 grantees | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and

Base: ~3,200 grantees across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

*"It would be nice if John Ellerman Foundation would **visit us** to see first-hand the benefits of their generosity and **gain greater understanding** of how the organisation is using their funding."* (Older people, £1-5m, Grantee – survey)

*"I did actually ask them, 'Obviously we've had to make changes; **how frequently would you like to hear from us**, if at all, on what those changes are, or are you happy to hear when we send the next end of year report?' **I haven't had a clear answer on that yet.***

***"Assuming that they want us to feel like we're kind of equal to them, maybe checking in with us a bit more as well as us kind of checking in with them? So it feels a bit more like it's a two-way relationship, rather than us driving so much of the communication."** (Grantee, Arts, £501k-1m)*

"Maybe what I've been saying about the communications and the contact; even just maybe in the emails if it was a bit more responsive; it should be driven as well by us in terms of figuring out this is how the communication will work, this is the frequency we want, so it's like a bit more clear from the get-go." (Grantee, Arts, £501k-1m)

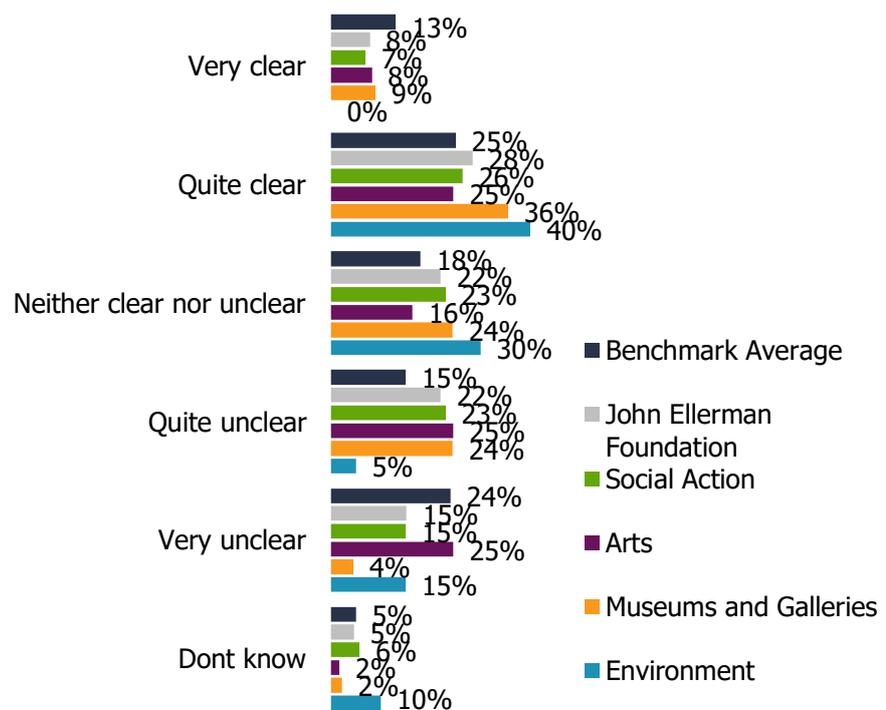
When asked to compare their relationship with John Ellerman Foundation with other grant makers, grantees mentioned that they do value close relationships with funders and personalised grant management and that they appreciate when funders approach them to give advice (see example below).

*[On relationship with the Arts Council]: "I think that's quite close. Our relationship manager has quite a lot of time for us which is nice, and I think there's a real sense that we fill a gap in the sector. (...) the feedback we get from our relationship manager is that we are quite unique and that we would be very hard to replace. He does seem very **keen to give us the right advice at the right time, to help us with things so that we are able to kind of maintain ourselves.** We continue to fill what would otherwise be a gap in the sector, I suppose."* (Grantee, Arts, £501k-1m)

Feedback for unsuccessful applicants

Almost 40% of unsuccessful applicants were ‘quite’ or ‘very’ unclear as to why the John Ellerman Foundation had rejected their application – a figure similar to the benchmark average of 39% (see Figure 10). However, when comparing the different grant streams offered by the John Ellerman Foundation, discrepancies become apparent. While only 20% of unsuccessful applicants to the Environment funding programme said it was ‘quite’ or ‘very’ unclear why their application had been declined, the figure was 50% for unsuccessful applicants applying to the Arts programme.

Figure 10: Unsuccessful applicants’ clarity on why their application was rejected by funding programme



“Was it clear why John Ellerman Foundation declined your application?”

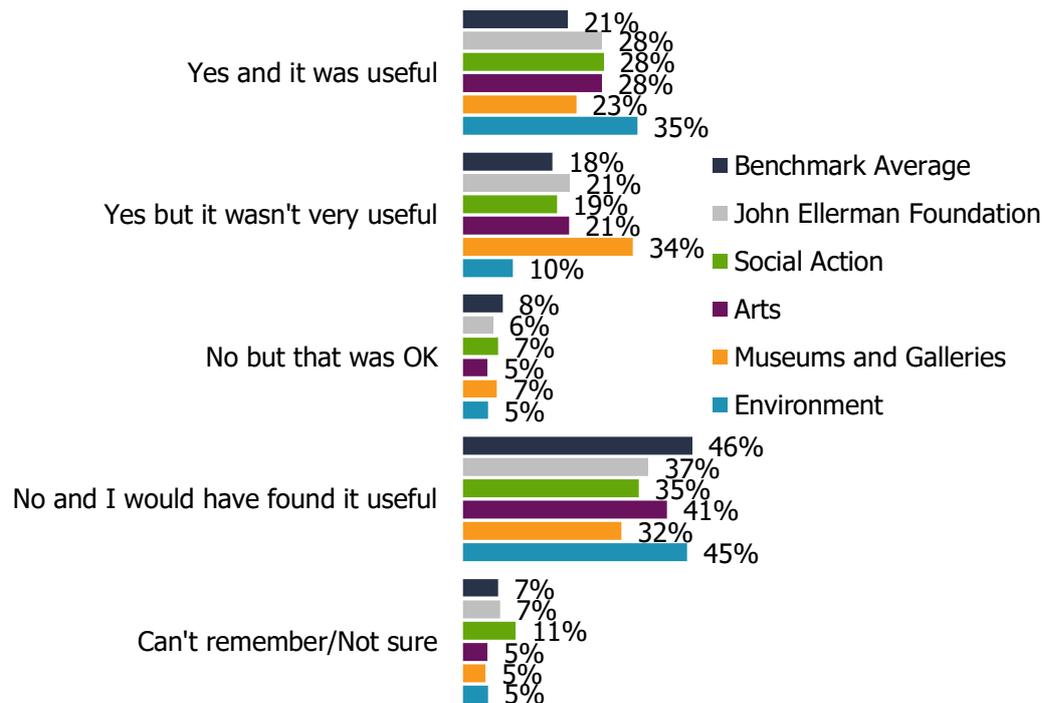
Base: 218 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and

Base: ~1,700 unsuccessful applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

Figure 11 gives more detail on unsuccessful applicant’s perceptions of the feedback they received from John Ellerman Foundation. Around half of the unsuccessful applicants (49%) said they had received feedback on why John Ellerman Foundation rejected their application, and 28% of the unsuccessful applicants found the feedback they received useful. Both figures are higher than the benchmark average with 38% receiving feedback on their unsuccessful applications and 21% considering it useful.

However, 43% of unsuccessful applicants said they had not received any feedback on why the John Ellerman Foundation rejected their application. This percentage is lower than the benchmark average at 54%. Yet, 37% said they would have found feedback useful – a need we explored during the telephone interviews with four unsuccessful applicants (see next section).

Again, discrepancies between the different funding programmes can be seen. For example, applicants to the Museums and Galleries stream were the most likely to report having received feedback (57%) but also the most likely to find it not useful (34%). In contrast, applicants to the Environment programme were the most satisfied with the feedback they received – only 10% thought the feedback was not useful.

Figure 11: Feedback on unsuccessful applications by funding programme

"Did you receive any feedback on why your proposal was unsuccessful?"

Base: 215 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy and

Base: ~1,500 unsuccessful applicants across 8 grant-makers | Source: Grant makers benchmark, June 20, nfpSynergy

Any kind of feedback would be valued

When talking to unsuccessful applicants during the telephone interviews, we found that charities valued feedback helping them in their decisions on how to go forward. For example, many mentioned the importance of knowing whether their proposal was rejected due to the high number of applications and if they should reapply with an improved version of their proposal, or if their organisation is not a good fit and would never be funded by John Ellerman Foundation. As interviewees recognised the strain individual feedback puts on grant makers with limited staff capacity, many did not expect anything too extensive (see example below).

*"I think the last round of applications when I did ring up and speak to somebody, they said that there were 63 applications and they could take seven forward to Round Two, so to give everybody individual feedback is obviously quite a daunting task, but it's so useful for people in my position to be able to have that feedback, just to know whether you'd love the application but there were other things that you loved more and it is worth applying again. Even that sort of feedback would be really helpful; not just to say, 'we can't give any', but it's just always better when people are honest. If they said, 'We loved your application but we loved others more', that's fine because you know that in the next round, it's worth applying to that fund again, to be compared to different other applications on that second try. **Whatever the reason is - 'We would never support your charity' - that's fantastic to know**, because you know that that's not a grant giving body that you're matched to as an organisation and then waste your time again with that one. Even top-line feedback like that, rather than just saying, 'We can't give feedback', would be really helpful. I know that's a lot of work, but that really does make a difference."* (Unsuccessful applicant, Museums & Galleries, £101-250k)

However, other unsuccessful applicants mentioned how more detailed feedback pointing out the reasons why their proposal was rejected would be of great benefit when it comes developing their projects and proposals in the future. For most interviewees, receiving feedback in an email or a letter was sufficient, but one noted the importance of personal contact.

*"If organisations fail at Stage 1 then it would be helpful to have clearer feedback about **whether it was** that idea, the **amount** applied for or the **organisation** that wasn't the good fit. If there is a clear weakness (e.g. organisational structure or level of reserves etc) that would be useful to know."* (Children and young people, £250-500k, Unsuccessful – survey)

"I would like to have feedback if there was something critical that that I had applied for that I really would not have got the grant because of it. [...] To stop people wasting their time, feedback is great to help people develop their proposals. If there was something that was really missing; so "You've done this great research proposal, but actually we're really strong on output and engagement as part of the project outcomes and we felt that this project really lacked in the deliverables on outreach", for example, that would be really helpful." (Unsuccessful, Environment, £1-5m)

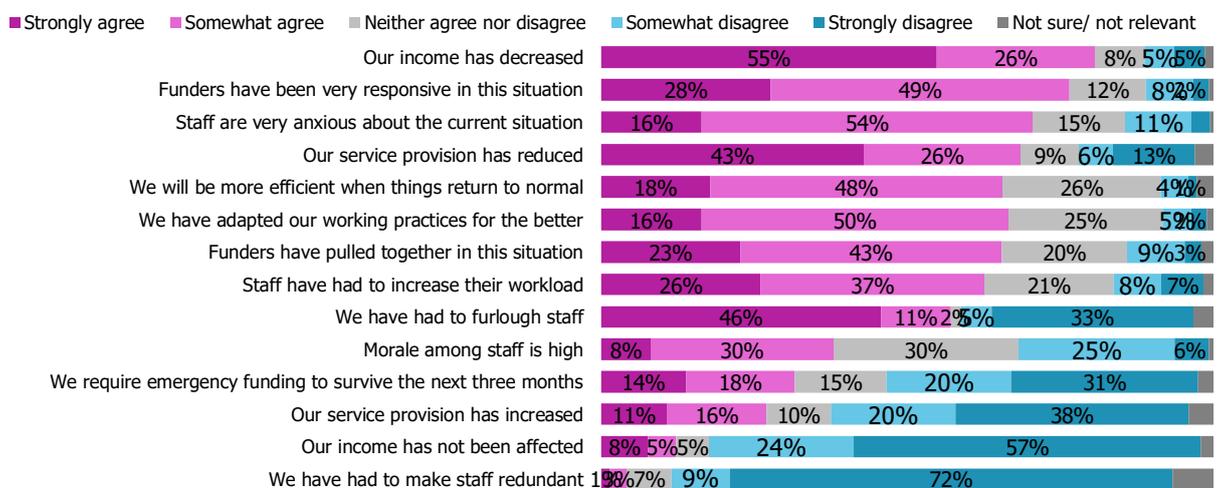
*"The frustration was I emailed and I called and no one ever got back to me. I think that if I was able to speak to someone before and after - I think that even for the next application, which I think November is the next time we can apply - I'm still unclear what I can apply for. Because to be honest, I would be putting on the exact same application but what the money would be going towards would probably be different. Because I know that the conversation will be, 'Just read the guidelines', I understand that because it has to be fair, but it's also quite frustrating because usually **within a conversation you can get a sense of, 'Actually, I get it now.'** Sometimes the guidelines are specific that they miss out a lot of things that only a grant officer would know; and you can question specific guidelines and sentences in the guidelines, **but you can only do it with a person.**"* (Unsuccessful applicant, Social Action, £5-10m)

Applicants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perceptions / perspective on the future of funding

Majority have seen negative consequences due to coronavirus but perceive funders as responsive

When we surveyed applicants in May/June this year about the impact of the pandemic on their organisations, it was clear that many had been negatively impacted. 81% said their income had decreased, 69% said their service provision had reduced and only 38% said morale among staff was high. Figure 13 shows that unsuccessful applicants to the Foundation were more likely to have had a tougher time than grantees, with higher levels saying their staff were anxious and that they require emergency funding to survive the next three months.

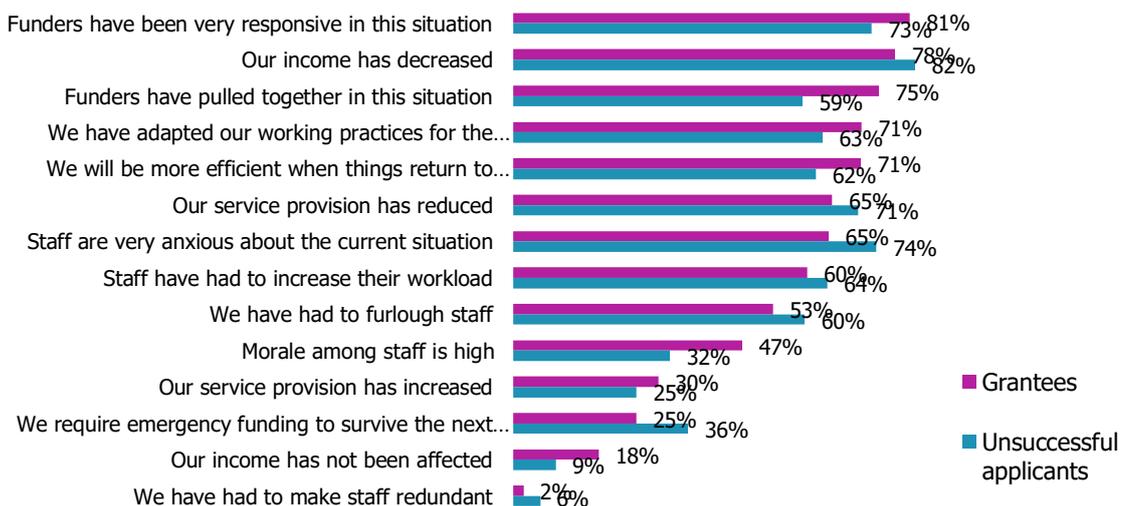
Figure 12: Applicants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic



"We'd like to ask you some questions about how your organisation has been impacted by the outbreak of coronavirus. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

Base: 137-143 grantees & 205-218 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy

Figure 13: Applicants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic by grantees vs unsuccessful applicants



"We'd like to ask you some questions about how your organisation has been impacted by the outbreak of coronavirus. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" **Strongly agree + Somewhat agree**
 Base: 137-143 grantees & 205-218 unsuccessful applicants | Source: John Ellerman Foundation Application Audit, June 20, nfpSynergy

John Ellerman Foundation has responded well to the crisis

Some grantees we interviewed on the phone were very grateful for the flexibility the Foundation has shown over the course of the pandemic. Many charities have had to change or stop their work, which has meant diverting away from the original terms of their grant. There were positive comments about John Ellerman Foundation's flexibility, but also in the flexibility from other funders. As Figure 12 above shows, 77% of applicants believe funders have responded well to the crisis.

"Particularly now in this year with the pandemic, the support that I wanted was for the John Ellerman Foundation to say, 'Yes, we can understand why you want to reshape this project, because the world has changed beyond recognition from when you applied. Yes, you can do what you want to do'. That support was very important; it would be nice to have that in writing as well, but it was really important and very valuable at the time." (Grantee, Museums & Galleries, £251-500k)

"John Ellerman have been really good because they allowed us to re reuse some of the money in a different way." (Grantee, Museums & Galleries, £251-500k)

"But I think certainly around the COVID stuff [...] it felt like they were being very flexible on the reporting deadlines. They were like, 'If you can't make your deadline, don't worry, just let us know; we appreciate it's a very chaotic time and unprecedented' and all that jazz. It felt like they were very understanding around that." (Grantee, Arts, £501k-1m)

"Funders have been very understanding with regard to project funding and perhaps not being able to meet outcomes or enabling us to be flexible with how funding is spent." (Museums & Galleries, £1-5m, Unsuccessful)

Lots of anxiety about the availability of funds in the short to medium term

Many participants in the research were aware of emergency funding that other grant makers have offered, and indeed many have applied for it. Some are very concerned that emergency funding has eaten into future funding pots, meaning that there will be fewer grants available in 2021 than there otherwise would have been.

"My biggest concern now is not how we pay for this year, it's what happens to the funds from foundations in the next 12 months when I need to look to reapply for grants. Will foundations have a reduced cash pool? Will they have repurposed a number of their funding streams to deal with more social issues? I fear as a niche charity that we may have dropped off a number of priorities for funders who would ordinarily have had an interest in us; that's a significant concern for us." (Grantee, Environment, £251-500k)

"It felt like competition was getting fiercer for grants and fundraising already anyway, so that probably made things more difficult. I don't know if the impact there has been that when they've

*been offering emergency grants, **maybe there's been less money in their project grant cost.***" (Grantee, Arts, £501k-1m)

*"I think the conversations that I have with colleagues are around, whilst people do need emergency funds, those people that maybe are a bit more stable or stable for a year or whatever need to carry on developing their existing business model to be here in two years' time or three years' time. **So it's not all about this year;** I'm sure that's been said in various ways. **It's almost like if you're not up to it then you're not now, but you might be in a year.**"* (Unsuccessful applicant, Arts, £251-500k)

*"The direction I think it's gone in is that a lot of projects-based funding has been replaced with emergency grant funding, so the requirements and the perimeters and goal posts have changed quite a lot. funders are saying that you know those who are the most financially at risk or at risk of not being able to reopen are exactly what they want to be funding, which I think is exactly right; and I don't think that that's any bad thing. **For years in the industry we've been saying that registered charities** [which is what] **basically all museums are, and having that resource to fill in lengthy applications and to come up with projects that need doing on top of the daily running isn't enough.** What we always refer to the unsexy things that need to be funded, that funders always very reluctant to; so we often feel like funders want to fund an education program, so that patrons can come in and see the results of their spending firsthand, these sort of very specific projects with specific outcomes; but I think there's always been a sense in the museums and galleries sector, that actually it's the core costs that need funding."* (Unsuccessful, Museums & Galleries, £101-250k)

Lessons for funders – be more flexible and unrestricted

We were very keen to find out how perceptions of funding had changed because of the pandemic. Participants in the research had many views on this. Emergency funding has shown to many than funding can be turned around quickly and less onerously. There were calls for more flexibility and for more unrestricted funding. Below is a selection of the many comments from the research.

*"Lighter touch application forms we've also seen quite a lot of, which has been quite nice; **we're asked fewer questions and we're asked to make fewer promises and to stick to them within funding.** It's nice to know that there's a level of flexibility to the scheme; a funder that I think is remarkable at doing that is the Esmee Fairbain Foundation, through the Museums Association, for the collections from the Esmee Fairbain Collections Fund which the Museum's Association administer."* (Unsuccessful applicant, Museums & Galleries, £101-250k)

*"COVID's actually really opened up the eyes of funders to see that **without this support for the very basic operation of the museums and galleries, then we are at severe risk of having to close.** [...] What I'd like to see in the future is organisations that will fund museums and galleries with regular ongoing cash flow, basically, rather than it being project-based and restricted; **maybe more unrestricted funds are available for museums and galleries to apply.** Almost like a benevolence fund for organisations that need it for whatever reason, that means that the day-to-day costs and capital expenses can be covered."* (Unsuccessful applicant, Museums & Galleries, £101-250k)

*"**They should be prepared; like an emergency response**, it doesn't matter if it's weather related/pandemic related. It could be terrorism related; particularly in the UK, these are not new things to us. They should have a response plan in place and have worked through all of this stuff up front so that when it happens, they have all the mechanisms in place and off they go. I know the actual funding that's available, obviously you can't pre-plan that; but you could always plan, 'based on what we have, x or y, we are going to do these things; this is the person that's responsible for it'. It's just the same as, we have emergency planning; we don't wait for a hurricane to hit our islands, we have all of that in place and I think that it would be a good idea for funders to have the same thing. It doesn't need to be complex, but the people that who are responsible for it should know they're responsible for it. It's something they could work on in the background; just make it smoother for everybody. I think it's been a very hectic time."* (Unsuccessful, Environment, £1-5m)

*"One of the single biggest things that would help is turning a grant **from a restricted grant to an unrestricted** grant." (Arts, £1-5m, Grantee)*

*"Funders have been helpful for immediate relief and help but so far **nothing beyond the initial 6 months** which is now needed." (Other, £1-5m, Grantee)*

*"It would be great for funders to reassure current and future grantees when grant applications for 'business as usual' activities will be accepted and **whether the funding priorities** of trusts **will change** in the long term post CV-19." (Housing and homelessness, £250-500k, Grantee)*

About nfpSynergy

nfpSynergy is a research consultancy that aims to provide the ideas, the insights and the information to help non-profits thrive.

We have over a decade of experience working exclusively with charities, helping them develop evidence-based strategies and get the best for their beneficiaries. The organisations we work with represent all sizes and areas of the sector and we have worked with four in five of the top 50 fundraising charities in the UK.

We run cost-effective, syndicated tracking surveys of stakeholder attitudes towards charities and non-profit organisations. The audiences we reach include the general public, young people, journalists, politicians and healthcare professionals. We also work with charities on bespoke projects, providing quantitative, qualitative and desk research services.

In addition, we work to benefit the wider sector by creating and distributing regular free reports, presentations and research on the issues that charities face.

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