

Looking back to look forward

(4 minute read)

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Where to start? This update marks, almost to the day, a year since I returned to John Ellerman Foundation – having worked here previously between 2018-2020. I left in March 2020 to start my own business as a freelancer only to be faced with a pandemic and then shortly after the realisation that I missed the hustle and bustle of an office and a team dynamic! This was certainly a period of uncertainty, but it wasn't to last, as during a summer yoga retreat to Cornwall I asked for a clear sign to help guide my decisions about my career and was almost instantly notified of the fact that the Foundation was recruiting!

Fast forward two months to 3 October 2023, and I was walking through those doors again in the role of the Foundation's Executive Assistant. A warm feeling of familiarity crept over me, the portrait of Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman) greeting me, Esther's cheerful paintings, our epic view of the Corinthian and my old desk - heck there was even some Lady Grey I'd purchased in 2019 still in the cupboard!

But despite this feeling, there was definite change in the air – a new strategy, some big goals and milestones set, a restructure and a completely new team incoming. Within my first week some huge conversations were happening around our [time horizon](#) and I felt so excited to be a part of it. After the meeting I couldn't help but message Sufina with my reflections on the different avenues that could be taken, exciting possibilities, and the impact this would have on our funding and the future of the Foundation.

The next few months zipped by in a flurry of new faces incoming and saying goodbye to a fantastic team of freelancers who were integral to keeping the Foundation's operations going during a period of much change. We marked this occasion of transition with a Christmas get together and an electric atmosphere that was bubbling with anticipation and meaningful conversation over darts, prosecco and nachos.

The start of January 2023 was a haze of inductions and getting to know one another. Now a team of two remote workers and five London based hybrid workers – despite the physical distance between us, what became evident was that we were a collective of diverse and vibrant individuals gathered with a shared interest in improving the wellbeing of others through our work.

Over a two day [team visit to York](#) we developed our team charter and created space to get to know each other on a deeper level. Over breakfast, strolls in the beautiful city of York, cakes at Betty's tea rooms, and our sessions facilitated by Sufina Ahmad, our Director, we reflected quite deeply on our life experiences, various career paths and the journeys that led us to be here at the Foundation. We set our intentions and left York with clarity about how we wanted to work, with the part that stood out to me being our commitment as a team to act with as much transparency as possible and be the best service provider of grants to charitable organisations that we can be.

Fast forward another nine months later, and I still believe this is what unites us as a team and I hope this comes through to the organisations that we work with. We really care about our interactions with each other, with our applicants and with our grant-holders and these values can be seen running through the everyday fabric of our operations.

In February 2023, we embarked on Smarter Not Harder training whose principles we continue to revisit regularly at our team meetings to ensure we are working as efficiently and as considerately as we possibly can with one another – which is pretty easy for this team!

As the year has progressed, our team efficacy continues to increase. Alongside our day-to-day work streams, the team are making strides pursuing individual training and upskilling that not only provide them personal growth but also contributes to strengthening us as a group. We use our Monday meetings to take turns to give short presentations on our any learning and take time to appreciate each other, share our thoughts and celebrate our efforts. Recently we heard from Stephanie Santiano, Grants Officer, who recently completed her training through 10 Years Time, we have had updates from Jo Bridger, Grants Manager, on the [DEI Data Standard](#) and creating accessible funding for disabled groups, and from me on my reflections on the current social media landscape post the X, formerly Twitter, takeover.

As a team we are keen for conversation and sharing perspectives, even if the topic is a challenging one! Our recent AimHi training on the nature and climate crises brought an interesting dynamic to our discussions, with all of us having to navigate the difficult issues surrounding the very real consequences of these crises and face this topic together to address and help relieve some of the anxieties we all feel.

As we take a leap into Autumn, there is an air of momentum within the organisation. We have showcased a fantastic year of evolution by recently signing off on our [annual report and accounts 2022/23](#). The Grants Team has completed their annual refresh of our guidelines and Ciorsdan Brown, Head of Research and Impact, continues her important work on developing our impact framework and together with Mark Hart, Finance and Operations Manager, continue to embed the principles of our [investment policy](#) as part of our [2022-25 strategy](#). Sufina and our Board start to prepare for an Away Day in November and we are about to press print on '[A Historical Review](#)' which is the culmination of many years of research into the origins of our endowment and the history of our founder – a project I was involved in from its humble beginnings and am now delighted to see the end result!

What a year of successes! Sometimes I look through my to do lists (which I keep – sad I know!) from the past year and reflect on what's been achieved over such a short period and I feel such a sense of pride and I'll be honest – joy!

I'm not someone who usually tracks back but it has been worth it in order to return to an organisation that's main aim is to look forward. As I embark on my next big journey – as a mum to be! For now, I am saying goodbye to an amazing team dynamic that has been built over this year, but I so look forward hearing about all the big developments and key events that will occur in 2024 and that will continue to shape the Foundation and its future.