

Seeking feedback – why and how it drives forward progress and change

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In April 2020, in the midst of the first lockdown relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, John Ellerman Foundation embarked upon its first ever in-depth and independently commissioned perception audit, where we asked grant-holders and applicants for their feedback on our application process, and where applicable, their experience of receiving a grant from us. At the time, it felt daunting to be seeking this feedback, not just because we were so acutely aware of the many pressures the sector and those working in it were facing, but because we knew how important it was to get this request for feedback right. We wanted to be sure that with the questions we asked, we were ready for any and all feedback we received – ideally plenty of positives for us to rejoice in, but undoubtedly there would be feedback that would be difficult for us to hear. We partnered with [nfpResearch](#) for our first audit and shared all the findings in a written update on our website published in October 2020, and on a newly constructed page on our website titled ‘Survey feedback’, which can be accessed [by clicking here](#).

Back in 2020 we received 361 responses out of a possible 629 – of which 143 were grant-holders and 218 were unsuccessful applicants. The findings were positive overall, with respondents describing us as an approachable, human, flexible and professional funder that would support causes many others wouldn't, and our offer of core funding often being reflected upon positively. Many of the respondents thought we are of a similar size to organisations like Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, despite our team being 5.8 full time equivalents back then. Our application process received praise at both the first and second stages, and our reporting on grants once awarded was considered by a high proportion as ‘not difficult’.

There were also clear areas for improvement and progress that emerged from the perception audit. This resulted in some next steps that we published to our website and acted upon in the coming months. This included adding a document to the website in November 2020 that outlined the decision timelines for our two-stage application process, increasing the ways in which pre-application advice could be sought and ensuring that this was consistently offered and received by applicants across the team, enhancing our declination offer by sharing the reasons for declining an application at all stages of the application process and across all our programmes, and ensuring that grant-holders were clear and confident about getting in touch with us for support as needed, even though we tend to be a light touch and hands off grantmaker. There was also feedback on ensuring that we were transparent about the number of organisations we fund each year that are new to our grants portfolio or have been funded by us before, and this is now included as standard in our Annual Report and Accounts.

Fast forward to April 2023 and we commissioned [nfpResearch](#) to complete a perception audit for us again, aimed at our applicants and grant-holders between April 2020 and March 2023. Whilst we were not dealing directly with a pandemic, we thought once again about whether we could trespass on people's time once again when the sectors we operate in and support are dealing with increased demand, higher than ever running costs, reducing funding streams, continued political tumult, and much more besides. However, we know that it is important to seek feedback regularly, and to use this to shape our ways of working. We also knew that 2022 had been a significant year of transition for

the Foundation, with the agreement of our strategy for 2022-25 and the implementation of a new organisational structure, and that it would be important to find out more about how this had been experienced. We opted for the same approach as last time – a survey for applicants and grant-holders taking 15-20 minutes to complete, and 10 in-depth interviews exploring some of the findings from the survey in more detail.

We received a total of 233 responses out of a possible 691 to the survey, meaning we had a response rate of 33%. 87 respondents were grant-holders and 146 were unsuccessful applicants, which represents a response rate of 55% and 27% respectively for these groups. Whilst the 2023 response rates were lower than in 2020, it is still a robust and representative sample, and nfpResearch typically finds that the response rates for grant-holders is about 40% and for unsuccessful applicants is 15%.

What did the 2023 results show us – the positives

The Foundation was perceived as a positive, supportive and progressive force in the wider sector, that has a good reputation, is approachable, has strong leadership, and a strong feedback culture. 85% of our grant-holders felt that we were living up to our organisational values of being responsive, discerning, connected, flexible and applying a personal touch too.

Our offer of core funding remains highly valued, as does our offer of funding for policy, advocacy and campaigning work within our Social Action and Environment funding categories. Respondents were also very positive about the involvement of Trustees in application assessment – particularly as part of the second-stage Visit, with 7 in 10 respondents feeling better understood afterwards. It was heartening to see that we were considered a transparent and thoughtful funder that lives its values, is approachable, has strong leadership and a strong culture of feedback.

The results on providing feedback to declined applicants were particularly encouraging. 60% of unsuccessful applicants are now clear on why their application was unsuccessful, compared to only 36% in 2020. Applicants commented that the feedback received was clear, constructive and personalised. According to nfpResearch, such a significant and demonstrable improvement is unprecedented amongst the benchmark and in their years of conducting perception audits.

The application process experience outranks that of the average funder and has improved, with 61% of grant-holders and unsuccessful applicants rating the application process as excellent or very good compared to 54% in 2020. There was a positive response to our pre-application support, and an appreciation for this being provided by all levels of the Grants Team. The time grant-holders spend on applying has reduced since 2020, as well as the time taken for us to reach a decision on whether to award a grant (3.3 months on average for grant-holders and 2.5 months for unsuccessful applicants) which is around the same as the benchmark average for both.

What did the 2023 results show us – areas for improvement

We saw a reduction in the number of grant-holders who would describe us as ‘very helpful’ after receiving a grant – this went down to 46%, having been at 69% in 2020. The main reasons given for this relate to the levels of staffing changes at the Foundation in 2022, and some grant-holders being less clear on who to contact during this time. This also impacted our results in relation to the number of grant-holders who felt ‘very well’ understood, which went down to 38% (having been 45% in 2020). It was reassuring to see that many respondents did reflect that the new Grants Team is settling in

well, having joined in November and December 2022, and that they were feeling much clearer now on who their points of contact were in the organisation.

Some respondents also raised the issue of our criteria to support work that is nationally significant, and this being considered by some as a barrier when applying to us, particularly for organisations embedded in their communities and operating more locally. However, there were also insights around the national significance criteria being a way in which the Foundation can have a wider reach and greater impact. Only 25% of unsuccessful applicants found us to be flexible, particularly in relation to funding criteria. This is perhaps inevitable, given that we have seen year on year increases in our application numbers and this is resulting in us having to decline more organisations.

We also used the audit to consider in more depth our funder plus offer, i.e. the support we can provide beyond our grants. The Foundation has a small funder plus offer already, comprising trainings and access to our meeting room in London mainly. The responses offered us some ideas to explore, like supporting grant-holders to network with each other, or strategic, legal and consultancy support. Some responded that whatever the offer might be, they would likely struggle to find the time to engage with it meaningfully.

What will we be doing now, based on this feedback

The findings present a real opportunity for us to continue improving the way we work. We used the last set of results to develop a programme of work that we published to our website, and we are doing the same this time round too.

Declinations – The feedback we provide on applications we decline has improved significantly since 2020. However, we need to be sure that when declining applications, we provide more than just the reason of there being insufficient funds, which came up in some of the feedback. This is something that we are already correcting for, and we have put in place processes since January 2023 that mean that we avoid doing this altogether. We also updated our feedback process for the Museums and Galleries Fund in February 2023, whereby we now provide a standard declination email to all declined applicants that includes a summary of the main reasons an application was declined and then provides the offer of more detailed feedback should this be requested. Previously, we simply told organisations they had been declined, without providing any reasons. We also introduced a Complaints Policy in July 2023, aimed at unsuccessful applicants primarily.

National significance definition – There is some confusion about what national significance means. Since August 2020, we have been completing annual reviews of our funding guidelines, and we have received feedback previously about there being some confusion on the definition of national significance. This resulted in some clear changes in 2021 and 2022. We reviewed the way in which we described national significance again in 2023 as a Board and team, and hope that this ongoing review of the definition of national significance will make it clearer.

Pre-application support offer – It's not always clear that pre-application support is available. This information is available and stated on our website in multiple places and in our funding guidelines. However, in September 2023 we added a note to the contact us page stating that all pre-application enquiries should be directed to Stephanie and Jo, our Grants Officer and Grants Manager respectively. Hopefully this will help to make it clearer that pre-application support is available.

Grants management – Some of our grant-holders felt that they didn't have as clear a point of contact or relationship with the Foundation in 2022, due to staffing changes and a restructure in 2022. Since January 2023, the grants portfolio has been spread across four members of the team,

rather than three, and every staff member has introduced themselves to each of our grant-holders as their point of contact. We continue to ensure that all our offer letters make clear who the manager of the grant is, and we offer 'check ins' six months into the first year of a grant between each grant-holder and the manager of their grant, in case there is anything they would like to discuss. Our current structure also means that we have more time available for progress and final reports to be read in detail and in a timely manner, and this is reflected in the quality of the responses grant-holders receive on their reporting.

Our funder plus offer – We asked about our funder plus offer in the audit and will need to consider what our funder plus offer should be in 2024. Whatever we design needs to consider carefully that many organisations just want the money and don't want to feel the pressure to attend funder plus activities. We also need to consider how to complement the good programmes of funder plus being offered to organisations already, like strategic, legal and consultancy support from Lloyds Bank Foundation and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. We would also need to consider the feedback on other funder plus activities we have offered already, for example Smarter Not Harder training, Aim-Hi Earth training and More in Common focus groups and themed discussions.

Why feedback matters

We don't take feedback for granted and appreciate deeply the time given freely by organisations to audits such as these. We know that there is always a power dynamic that exists between a funder and its applicants and grant-holders, and this can discourage organisations from giving us direct and honest feedback. However, we hope that by running these surveys via nfpResearch and in an anonymised way, alongside the fact that we can demonstrate that each time we ask for feedback we act upon it, that this demonstrates that there is an integrity and robustness in our perception audit process.

Our entire organisation is made up of seven full-time staff, and whilst we strive to be an outward-facing and collaborative organisation, we know that there will always be limits to how much we can learn and take in from others. That's why, when over the course of about a month, 243 people take the time to respond to our perception audit, we are provided with insights and understanding of our application process and how we are perceived and understood externally that it would be impossible for us to glean in any other way.

It is through perception audits like these, alongside other activities like participating in the Foundation Practice Rating, or pledging to be an Open and Trusting grantmaker, that we can be the kind of grantmaker we strive to be. One that is transparent, accountable and effective. One that is focussed on delivering its aim to advance wellbeing for people, society and the natural world.