



John Ellerman Foundation

Applicant perceptions research
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Introduction

Introduction

In February 2022, John Ellerman Foundation commissioned nfpResearch for a second round of research into grant-holder and unsuccessful applicant perceptions of the Foundation. The first round took place in spring 2020, a time when the world was in flux. At that time we had a number of conversations about whether we should proceed with the research, but we decided to go ahead with the survey in May 2020 and it had one of the highest response rates of any grant applicant survey we have run over the last 10 years.

John Ellerman Foundation responded to the research findings by implementing several changes, including increasing the levels of pre-application advice they offer, updating materials on their website relating to making applications, offering more feedback to unsuccessful applicants, and improving grant management relationships¹. In 2020, the Foundation committed to repeating the research to test the success of these changes, as well as gather timely perceptions of the organisation. 2020 was clearly an unprecedented time (though it feels we say this every year), but the results from our original research are still comparable to the 2023 data allowing us to derive conclusions and recommendations.

Objectives and methodology

The overall project objective was to explore perceptions of John Ellerman Foundation and the different aspects of its grantmaking. This was done through focusing on the following four objectives:

1. To understand the relationship between John Ellerman Foundation and its applicants
2. To understand perceptions of non-financial assistance
3. To see what values John Ellerman Foundation is seen to hold by grant-holders and applicants
4. To understand how these perceptions have changed since 2020.

The research was carried out in two phases. The first phase was an online survey with grant-holders and unsuccessful applicants, which took place between 4th April and 28th April 2023.

- In total, 233 organisations responded to the survey. The response rate for grant-holders was 55% and for unsuccessful applicants was 27%.

¹ <https://ellerman.org.uk/apply-for-funding/survey-feedback>

- Grant-holders were defined as having been successful with their most recent grant application; unsuccessful applicants as those who were unsuccessful with their most recent application.
- The Foundation's results are compared against a 'benchmark average.' This average is based on another body of research conducted with the grant-holders and unsuccessful applicants from 14 funding organisations. This will be referred to as the 'grant maker benchmark.' The sample size for the benchmark average is approximately 10,400. The sample size for the benchmark average can vary according to the question.

nfpResearch then carried out 11 interviews by telephone /Teams between 14th July and 8th August 2023. These interviews were designed to provide more insight on some of the themes that were uncovered in the survey. Specifically, the objectives were to explore:

- If guidance and communication from John Ellerman Foundation could be clearer or more helpful.
- Whether there were any barriers around the national significance portion of the application
- What constitutes good non-financial assistance?
- For grant-holders:
 - How they feel about their relationship with John Ellerman Foundation, what they value, and ways in which it can be improved.
 - Whether the in-person visit / online visit changed perceptions of John Ellerman Foundation.
- For unsuccessful applicants:
 - To understand how they felt about any feedback they received, whether they would apply for funding from John Ellerman Foundation again, and how aware they were of the circumstances of their unsuccessful application (e.g. – competitive grant, number of applications they were up against).
 - To understand whether applicants are aware of the decision-making process and how they feel about this.

Seven interviews were with grant-holders and four were with unsuccessful applicants. The sample was then split across income and funding stream.

Key findings

John Ellerman Foundation seen as a positive and progressive force in the sector

The Foundation is seen to get lots of things right as a funder. It is praised for its commitment to multi-year core funding, strong leadership, approachability, and transparency. Even when the Foundation doesn't get things right, it is seen to be open about this, is trying to improve and move in the right direction. Many research participants were very positive about their discussions with Sufina (the Foundation's Director) and the staff and noted that this ability to have these conversations is rare in the sector. Most grant-holders and applicants associate the Foundation with the values that it communicates, and as being thoughtful and open to discussing ideas ahead of applications.

The two-stage application process is still working well, with positive views on the second stage visit

Grant-holders and unsuccessful applicants were more likely to rate the application process as excellent or very good than in 2020. It is also viewed more positively than the grant maker benchmark. The process is seen as reasonable for the size of the grant that applicants are applying for and the quick first stage application process is appreciated by many. Nearly 70% of all those who had a virtual, hybrid or in person visit at the second stage appreciated the opportunity to showcase their work in person. Applicants appreciate the questions and believe that they are better understood because of them.

Staff team changes in 2022 did have a negative impact on relationships, but things are improving now

In 2022, John Ellerman Foundation's staff team went through a number of changes as a result of two staff moving to new positions elsewhere and an organisation wide restructure. Grant-holders felt the impact of this, particularly in their communication with the Foundation. Fewer grant-holders considered staff to be 'very helpful' than in 2020. Many grant-holders referenced staff changes in 2022 and not feeling like they had someone to contact during this time. There were also fewer grant-holders saying they felt 'very well' understood by John Ellerman Foundation compared to three years ago. However, there is a sense (particularly in the in-depth interviews) that things are now back on track and grant-holders do rate the Foundation highly in several metrics, particularly approachability.

National significance caused some confusion

'National significance' is a criterion that can be confusing, with some applicants feeling that it acts as a barrier when applying to the Foundation. More case studies would be needed for those who struggled to understand what it meant, while others simply disagreed with the criteria. They believed that it didn't place enough emphasis on the community or local work they do. However, there were others who appreciated it as a criterion, believing that it spoke to John Ellerman Foundation's strong principles and ambitious outlook.

John Ellerman Foundation has developed a strong feedback culture

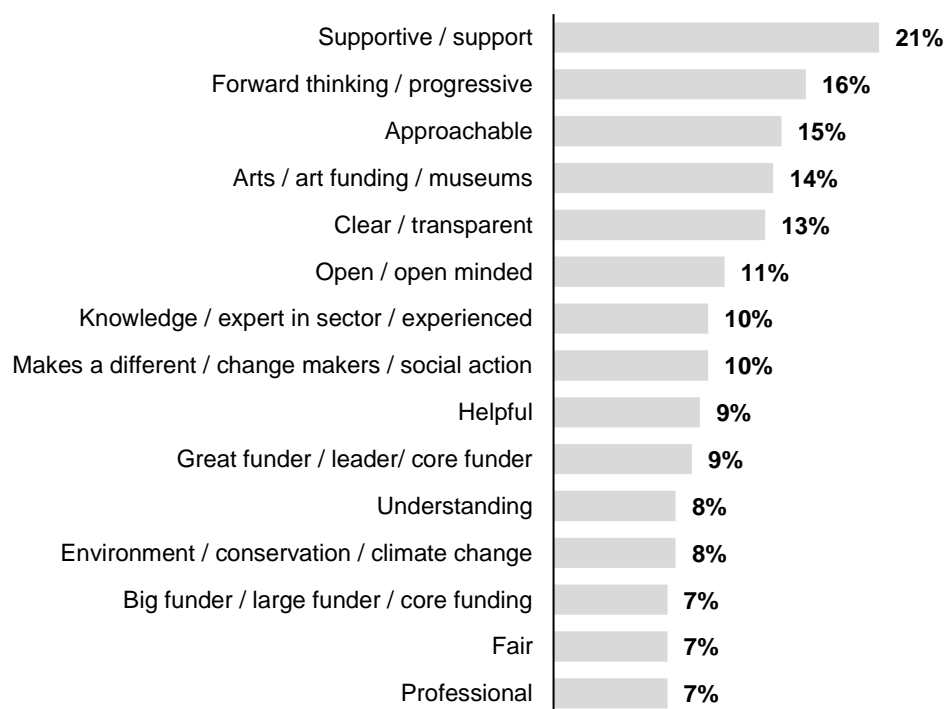
60% of unsuccessful applicants said that it was clear why their application was turned down. This is a 24% increase since 2020, and places John Ellerman Foundation significantly above the grant maker benchmark. Unsuccessful applicants appreciate constructive feedback that details, where possible, why their application was turned down. There were still those who didn't receive feedback or wanted more detail - clearly there is still progress to be made, but this represents a significant improvement from 2020.

In-depth findings

John Ellerman Foundation seen as positive and progressive force in the sector

Applicants had many positive comments for John Ellerman Foundation across the two phases of this research. Perhaps what stands out most is the sense of an approach and attitude that is constantly striving for the best for its applicants and to be better itself. In a question where applicants are asked what words or phrases come to mind when thinking about John Ellerman Foundation, 'supportive', 'forward-thinking / progressive' and 'approachable' are the top three. This is an unprompted question, where respondents give their views in their own words. Chart 1 shows the top 15 responses. Further analysis shows that not one negative mention appears in the top 30 – a very impressive result.

Chart 1: Top words or phrases associated with John Ellerman Foundation



"What words or phrases come to mind when you think of John Ellerman Foundation?" Source: John Ellerman Foundation survey April 2023 | Base: 87 Grant-holders & 146 Unsuccessful applicants

Applicants also highlighted John Ellerman Foundation's commitment to multi-year and core funding as a big positive. As one arts charity put it, this is "refreshingly and desperately needed in the arts." One unsuccessful applicant said,

"Offering multiyear core / unrestricted grants is really essential to small charities - particularly when the context in which we work is so fast moving and having the ability to be agile is important." (Unsuccessful applicant, Poverty and inequality)

Applicants commended the Foundation on being approachable and welcoming. This could mean being prepared to have a conversation to help applicants understand funding criteria and support with their application or being responsive to grant-holders.

“Support from your staff throughout the application process is unparalleled in the fundraising sector. The relationship with our contact at the Foundation was professional, but she was incredibly approachable, friendly, and helpful throughout the application process - of all the trusts and foundations we have applied to / have funding from, I have found it most easy to communicate with our contact at JE. All of the information on the website was also very clear, concise, and not overwhelming. I was able to easily find information on eligibility criteria and your focus areas without feeling overwhelmed by content, definitions, and confusing criteria.” (Unsuccessful applicant, Multiple complex needs)

“Approachable team who are very flexible to different organisations - we felt we could be honest and upfront at all times rather than trying to say what we thought you wanted to hear - supporting organisations to bolster capacity so they become more sustainable. For us, this isn't a shiny external facing project but is truly transformative for the organisation.” (Grant-holder, Museums and galleries)

Finally, some organisations wanted to commend John Ellerman Foundation for its work on social action – specifically social justice. As one organisation working in the space of poverty and inequality put it,

“We really like that John Ellerman supports funding, seems to genuinely value projects that support people with lived experience, and wants to tackle the root causes of social justice issues.” (Grant-holder, Poverty and inequality).

Another organisation praised the Foundation for its willingness to fund influencing work, something that many funders don't do.

“Specifically, we value that the Foundation maintains support for social justice issues, which includes funding influencing activity. We find that many philanthropic institutions do not fund influencing work.” (Unsuccessful applicant, Domestic abuse)

The two-stage application process is still working well, with positive views on the second stage visit

John Ellerman Foundation uses a two-stage application process, with a second stage visit assessment, carried out by trustees. Broadly this is seen to work well and saves unsuccessful applicants time,

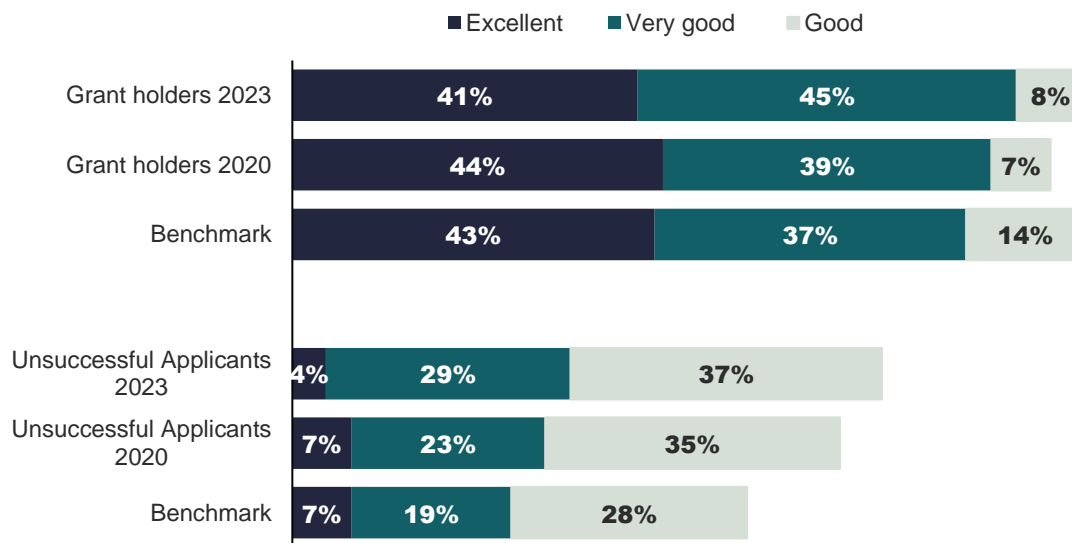
“Clear criteria, useful case studies. The two-stage process means you do not need to do a full grant application without some hope it will be accepted which saves time and energy on applications rejected at stage one.” (Unsuccessful applicant, Arts)

There were some who struggled with the brevity of stage one and trying to condense what they do into two pages. As one arts charity put it,

“Even to pull together a first stage application is a significant investment of organisation resource, so it is always going to be difficult when unsuccessful.” (Unsuccessful applicant, Arts)

However, a very high proportion of grant-holders and unsuccessful applicants rate the application process as excellent or very good. As Chart 2 shows, 86% of grant-holders rate the process as excellent or very good, vs 80% for the grant maker benchmark (based on the same question being asked to the grant-holders from 14 other funders). Unsuccessful applicants also rated the process favourably compared to the grant makers benchmark, with 70% rating the process as excellent, very good or good vs 56% for the benchmark.

Chart 2: Overall rating of the application process



"How would you rate your experience of the application process?" Source: John Ellerman Foundation survey April 2023 | Base: 87 Grant-holders & 146 Unsuccessful applicants

Overall, 92% of grant-holders and 87% of unsuccessful applicants felt the application process was reasonable for the size of grant they were applying for. There is clearly a balance to be struck with applications – not asking for too much upfront so that those who are unsuccessful feel particularly let down after investing a lot of time, and providing applicants with enough space to explain what they do. Most think John Ellerman Foundation have got this right, as one unsuccessful applicant put it in an in-depth interview,

“It’s a good overall process. The two-stage process is really useful. Obviously, you don’t have to invest a lot of time necessarily doing a big application. It’s very realistic what they want. And I think what’s quite nice is that it’s very direct in the first stage, in terms of them asking you how they meet their criteria. You don’t have to spend so much time on it. They don’t have to spend so much time on it. I think they got back to us fairly quickly, which again is nice. So, as an overall experience, I think it’s very positive”

“Looking at other major grant funders, it is a better process. So, thinking about other major funders, [redacted] Foundation is straight off with a big application, which obviously, if unsuccessful, takes a heck a lot of your time. And their criteria, as you may know, is very,

very vague – it's incredibly vague. So that can be challenging. Again, [redacted] Foundation, big old application. And then, opposite to someone like this is the [redacted] Foundation, which has a very short initial application and it's quite difficult to know if you fit the criteria... You have no idea what they want. I'd say Ellerman, out of the big funders, is probably the best in terms of the process" (Unsuccessful applicant, Arts)

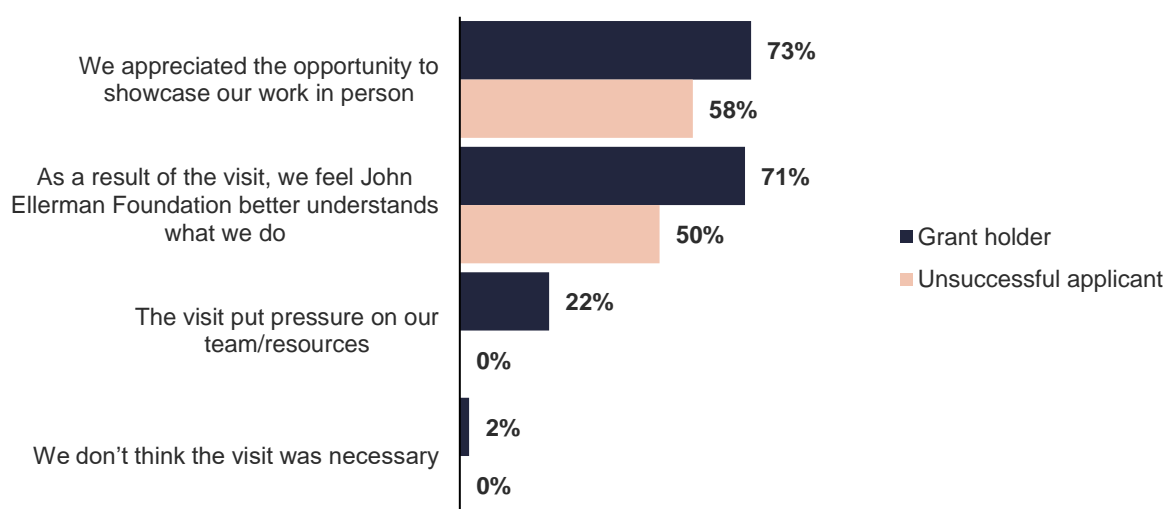
Those who had conversations with John Ellerman Foundation staff before submitting applications found this very helpful. Others would have appreciated a chat, with one unsuccessful applicant saying;

"I hadn't realised that I was able to set up a meeting with John Ellerman Foundation staff before submitting an application; but that is becoming evident through this survey. Perhaps it could be noted on the website." (Unsuccessful applicant, Arts)

The offer of a meeting with a member of staff appears in multiple locations on John Ellerman Foundation's website – in the contact us page, the How to apply tab and in the funding guidelines page - but clearly this applicant missed this information. Could it be displayed more prominently?

After submitting the second stage application, applicants are invited to a meeting with a trustee and / or a member of staff. We asked applicants how they felt about this visit, with results shown in Chart 3.

Chart 3: Attitudes towards second stage assessment visit



"Thinking about the Second Stage Assessment Visit from John Ellerman Foundation as part of your application, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" Strong + somewhat agree. Source: John Ellerman Foundation survey April 2023 | Base: 85 Grant-holders & 12 Unsuccessful applicants

Overall, the assessment visit is viewed very positively. 73% of grant-holders appreciated the opportunity to showcase their work. Of the 12 unsuccessful applicants who had the visit, just over half appreciated the opportunity to showcase their work and none felt the visit was unnecessary or put pressure on their team or resources. Many grant-holders reflected positively on the visit,

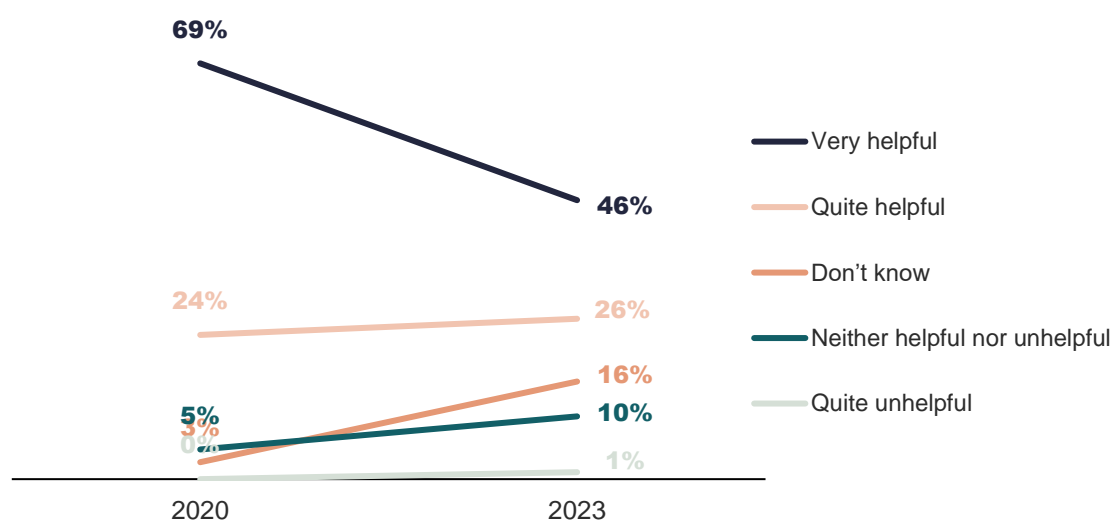
"The visit and interview is what sets John Ellerman Foundation apart from similar trusts and foundations in the arts. We have had multiple trustee conversations with the foundation now over the years and have always found them to be challenging in the best possible way. It

also helped us clarify and focus the ask considerably. The most recent grant we received, for example, is the most critical piece of core funding we've requested. However, on reflection, that need did not fully come across in the written application. Without the trustee meeting there is a strong chance we would have been unsuccessful with the application. The human touch and expert insight these visits provide feel so essential and welcome.” (Grant-holder, Arts)

Staff team changes in 2022 did have a negative impact on relationships, but things are improving now

2022 was a period of change for the John Ellerman Foundation staff team. Grant-holders in particular commented on this, mainly noticing that they had a turnover in grant managers or had emails that went unanswered. In one question we asked grant-holders how helpful their grant contact was after they received a grant, and there was quite a significant fall in the proportion saying very helpful – from 69% to 46%. Chart 4 shows this drop, but it is also important to note that almost no grant-holders answered unhelpful.

Chart 4: Attitudes towards second stage assessment visit



"How helpful was the John Ellerman Foundation staff member assigned to managing your grant after you received your grant?"

A number of grant-holders had comments about this. Some felt like they had been told why replies from John Ellerman Foundation would be slow. Others were frustrated that they didn't have the input they needed from John Ellerman Foundation into their complex, systems change work.

“Smooth application process and we appreciated the chance to speak to a Grants Manager at the beginning of the process who was very helpful. Due to staff changes you weren't able to read a draft as was offered but we understood the reason why.” (Grant-holder, Disabled people)

"I answered that I didn't know to a few questions about the quality and quantity of contact with the foundation post-award. Just noting that the context of this reply is the Foundation overhauling its staffing / structure, which we received periodic updates about and so weren't left in the lurch. But as a result of this we haven't had the contact we'd probably have had otherwise." (Grant-holder, Environment)

"Stronger contact with grantees (needed) - in both our grants we have had almost no contact with grants staff. In a systems change programme which is iterative and evolving this has been a barrier to a) feeling a sense of partnership and b) good grant governance. We understand how busy your teams are and also the changes in the last year but it would be good to be in touch more than 1x a year." (Grant-holder, 'other' sector)

In the in-depth interviews with grant-holders and unsuccessful applicants this theme was explored in more detail. On the whole, interviewees were understanding and also believed that communication and relationships had improved in 2023. As one grant-holder put it,

"I can see the change Sufina's trying to make but there is a relationship that's built on that. So, in terms of organisational relationship, I would say it's in the making and we also have a new point of contact from our side. It's almost like the teams that secured this grant no longer exist and there are new people on both sides, and we are rebuilding that relationship. So, it's not bad... Our first interaction with the new grant manager, Jo Bridger, went really well. She was great, and we're really pleased with the relationship we have with John Ellerman." (Grant-holder, Environment)

Overall, we should also note that grant-holder perceptions of the Foundation are still at high levels and have actually improved in some areas. 83% of grant-holders believe John Ellerman Foundation is better than other funders in the area of approachability, up from 76% in 2020. Similarly, there have been increases in positive perceptions of the ease of the application process, the speed of the decision on the grant, and how long it takes to make an application.

National significance caused some confusion

John Ellerman Foundation has two funding criteria relating to eligibility. One is around organisational size and form, the other is around national significance. With national significance there appears to be confusion over how to interpret it. As one unsuccessful applicant put it,

"There could be more clarity about what constitutes 'national significance' - for a performing organisation, is this number / spread of venues, or where audiences come from, or press reputation... I did enquire about this (although 12 months previously) and was advised that we met the criteria." (Unsuccessful applicant, Arts)

In the survey we asked applicants whether their organisation felt like it had faced any barriers to accessing funding from John Ellerman Foundation. Some felt that the national significance criterion was a barrier to them,

"In relation to groups that experience disadvantage, I feel the definition of national significance can be a real barrier. Generally speaking, disability causes are chronically underfunded and most funders when defining priorities around disadvantage and marginalisation simply don't include disability in this - including poverty. We'd like to see national funders do much more to address this imbalance." (Unsuccessful applicant, Disabled people)

Other groups were concerned that the community focussed approach of their work was being overlooked with the focus on national significance.

"It is a difficult concept - national significance - because it's so subjective and it's very difficult to attain. I would say that it would be the one element of the application process that is slightly problematic...I think the significance of our collections has shifted more towards community impact, which I think is a better measure." (Grant-holder, Museums & galleries)

Some applicants said they would like to see clearer guidance on the website as to what national significance could be for their organisation, for example case studies or FAQs could be helpful. One grant-holder in the arts said,

"The guidelines and the foundation's philosophy, particularly about the idea of national significance became more clear through a personalised call, rather than the copy available on the website." (Grant-holder, Arts)

There were also a number of comments in support of the shift towards the national significance criterion. Some felt that it fits what the Foundation is trying to achieve with its systems change work and more broadly with the ambitious aims John Ellerman Foundation is setting itself.

"We've found the foundation's process one of the clearest and most human. What's really made a difference is contact with staff and their help with interpreting guidance. The change in interpretation re: the foundation's 'national significance' criterion has been really helpful, allowing the Foundation to have the flexibility to genuinely support the best change-making work nationally. In the arts in particular, there are so few funders committed to following quality work with people at disadvantage, rather than a purely instrumental interpretation of what 'good' work with marginalised communities looks like. The Foundation is filling a big gap in the funding landscape." (Grant-holder, Arts)

John Ellerman Foundation has developed a strong feedback culture

One of the conclusions from the 2020 research with applicants was that feedback for unsuccessful applicants could be improved. In 2020, 36% of unsuccessful applicants said it was clear why their application had been declined. In 2023, this had increased to 60%. The grant maker benchmark for this measure across 14 funders currently sits at 42%. Nearly a fifth (19%) of unsuccessful applicants said it was unclear why their application was turned down, compared to 33% for the benchmark. John Ellerman Foundation has made real progress in the clarity of their feedback to applicants.

Chart 5 shows a similar question asking directly whether unsuccessful applicants had received feedback and whether it was useful. Again, John Ellerman Foundation has seen progress in this area since 2020, and compares very well to the grant maker benchmark. Only 15% of the sample said they hadn't received any type of feedback, compared to 52% for the grant maker benchmark.

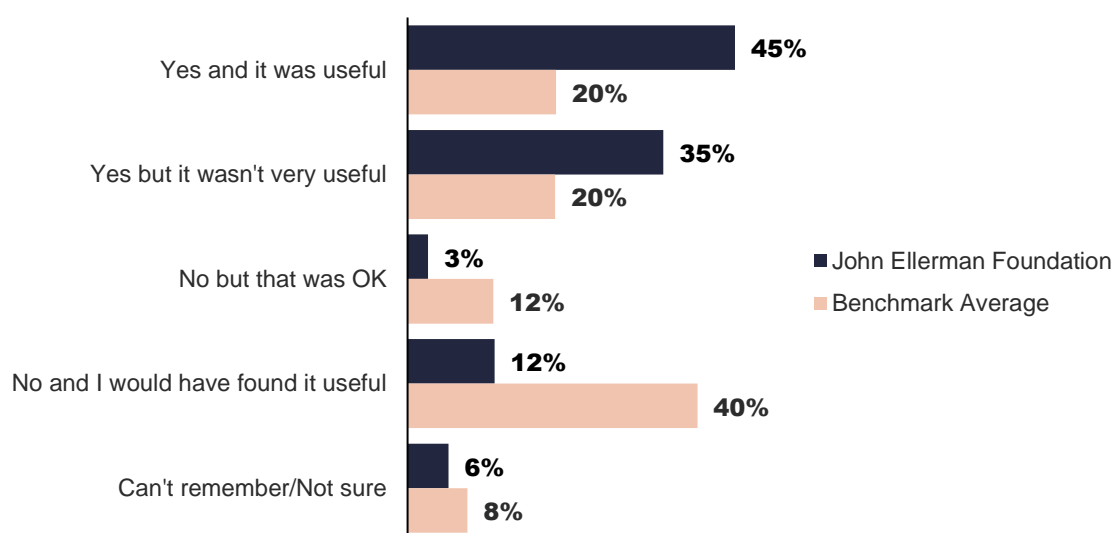
For organisations that had useful feedback, reasons given were around feedback being specific and conversations that were helpful and friendly. One housing and homeless charity said,

"Good feedback and further feedback was given when I asked for clarification. But it was rather overarching. We were encouraged to go again in a year and offered a review of our

application before submitting which will be useful.” (Unsuccessful applicant, Housing and homeless)

“It explained clearly why it was unsuccessful and has clarified our thinking / approach for potential future applications.” (unsuccessful applicant, Arts)

Chart 5: Feedback on unsuccessful application



"Did you receive any feedback on why your proposal was unsuccessful?" Source: John Ellerman Foundation survey April 2023
| Base: 146 unsuccessful applicants

Chart 5 also shows 35% of unsuccessful applicants did receive feedback but didn't find it useful. Not all organisations reported receiving specific feedback or not feeling like they received enough detail.

"It was basically because of competition. But a bit more about why the others were chosen over ours would still help us better shape proposals in future." (Unsuccessful applicant, Museums and galleries)

"I got general notes about those who were successful. Would be useful which area in particular our application fell short in. We don't challenge every decision made by funders, but it helps us in developing our plans and future applications." (Unsuccessful applicant, Arts)

John Ellerman Foundation continues to evolve its approach to feedback and has done so in every year since 2020. Over the last 12 months it has moved away from talking about competition alone as a reason for not supporting an application, but recognises there is more to do still. They do also make it clear to applicants that they can receive more detailed feedback if they want to, especially in relation to their Museums and Galleries Fund programme, which is open for several months of the year only and the volume of applications can limit the organisation's ability to offer detailed feedback. Many are clearly taking the Foundation up on this offer, but perhaps there needs to be clearer communication on this to drive these already impressive scores up more.



About us

nfpResearch is a leading market research agency in the not-for-profit sector. We put information in the hands of charities, to help them to help as many people as possible.

At nfpResearch, we believe it is not just charities that need high-quality research, but the funding organisations that assist them. We help funders to take crucial steps in maintaining their commitment to improved relationships with their applicants.

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