

# To create systems change, philanthropy first needs to change itself

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In June 2022, I was interviewed by colleagues at the Luc Hoffmann Institute in relation to their [Future of Philanthropy for Biodiversity](#) initiative. As a funder committed to contributing to greater harmony between people and the planet, through the protection, restoration, and enhancement of the natural world, this is something that I consider often in my role.

In our work, we see the many challenges and opportunities that our applicants and grant-holders are grappling with in pursuit of advancing the wellbeing of people, society, and the natural world. Consequently, we reflect often on whether we are doing enough and prioritising transformation in our work. There is no easy answer to this – some days we veer towards saying yes; on others, we don't. Realising that there's more for us to do in pursuit of transformative work - work that changes the system and influences government and the market - encourages us to strive for more and better, but feeling as though we are doing enough already risks hubris and failure.

In conversation with other philanthropic organisations, I see the increasing recognition that as funders we have not done enough to delve deep into our legacies, our power, or our principles. I see the querying of long-held norms and givens and the desire to change and challenge these. My biggest realisation has been that our past is our present and future too. By this, I mean that we must understand our origins and past decisions in order to learn what has been ingrained into our ways of working because if we don't we are doomed to deliver our work through a narrow and rose-tinted lens. It is these reflections and conversations that also lead me to realise that much of what has made philanthropy possible, such as the economic and political systems that allow for unfettered wealth creation and growth, is at the root of the work our philanthropy now seeks to address and improve.

Systems, such as the ones underpinning politics, economics, communities, health and wellbeing, our natural world and many more are often discussed by UK-based funders. In our discussions, it is not always clear if we are talking about one or many systems, or if we are clear on how the systems interact with each other and operate. Recently, I have had conversations that have made me wonder about whether the systems work we support as funders needs to be more ambitious. Questions arise in my mind such as: are we making surface-level changes rather than the deep changes that are truly at the root of the problems we see? Are we challenging the fact that these systems exist in the first place? Are we failing to consider both people and the planet in the systems we describe and support? Are we applying western/Global North ideals to the systems we are supporting?

In trying to answer these questions at the John Ellerman Foundation, we strive to first look inward by continually reviewing and re-assessing our internal guidelines and commitment to accountability. Through our investment policy, which was developed in 2020, we want to make sure that our investments align with the environmental work we support through our grant-making - in other words, what does a net zero or carbon-positive investment portfolio look like and how do we get there? And through regularly inviting feedback and independent audits of successful and unsuccessful applicants, we are also much clearer on how we are accountable to those that apply to us and those we fund, especially in light of the Foundation's commitment to spend down in 30 years' time.

Going forward, I believe we will benefit more from systems thinking and systems-based work that is designed and delivered in ways that are just, pluralistic, inclusive, and ambitious. This will mean ensuring that those most negatively impacted by various systems are empowered and enabled to design and pursue alternative ideals. But what role can philanthropy play in this kind of systems transformation? I think that there won't be one best way of doing things. Instead, we will need to embrace a tapestry of approaches that weave together in ways that enable the philanthropic movement to exist in community and in conversation with itself and those it seeks to support.

To support this reimagining of systems, I hope that philanthropic spaces will become intergenerational, diverse and inclusive. Our own publicly-available Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Policy sets our intentions in relation to its application in all that we do - from recruiting, retaining and progressing staff, to exploring the origins of our wealth, to our grantmaking and investing and more, as well as defining what DEI means to us. The policy recognises that the failure to prioritise and improve DEI practices within institutional philanthropy and the wider charity and philanthropic sector has led to the inequitable distribution of funding. At the John Ellerman Foundation, we hope that alongside others we can challenge ourselves to imagine and create new models and ideals through which to deliver our work. As well as borrowing and learning from other sectors and other parts of wider civil society, I hope that the philanthropic movement will be something that can be looked to for ideas and insights as well as responding to our biggest societal, cultural, and environmental challenges.

There may come a time when philanthropy will not be needed. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that philanthropy in its current form will not be needed. I look forward to working with others to think about the kind of philanthropy we need for the coming years and decades. I believe that it will be a kind of philanthropy that, with ambition and humility, finally takes on systems in a way that is no longer at the surface level.