

# **The Wolfson Foundation**

## **Grantee and Applicant Perceptions Audit**

2019

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## Methodology and objectives

The main audiences of this research are the Wolfson Foundation’s grantees and unsuccessful applicants. The objectives of the research were to:

1. Find out their understanding, perceptions and perspective of the Wolfson Foundation
2. Tease out the key threads of their views – both positive and negative
3. Understand how the Wolfson Foundation compares to other grant-makers
4. Get a broader idea of how the Wolfson Foundation’s grantees and applicants see grant-makers and what they want from them in an ideal world
5. Clearly set out these themes and how the Wolfson Foundation could act on them going forward

The research consisted of two phases. The first was an online survey of grantees and unsuccessful applicants, which took place between 3rd April - 23rd April 2019.

- The survey was sent out to 886 recipients. There were approx. 100 bounce back emails. 329 grantees and unsuccessful applicants started the survey. 155 grantees and 85 unsuccessful applicants completed the survey. (approx. 31% - 44% response rate).
- Grantees are defined as those who were successful with their most recent application; unsuccessful applicants as those who did not receive a grant.
- We have included in the data a ‘grant-maker average’. This average is based on the research nfpSynergy has conducted with the grantees and unsuccessful applicants from the Lloyds Bank Foundation, BBC Children in Need, the Tudor Trust, People’s Postcode Lottery, the Cumbria Community Foundation, the Nominet Trust and now, the Wolfson Foundation. The sample size for the grant-maker average is 4000.

The second phase was a series of telephone interviews conducted with grantees and applicants. The interviews delved further into the areas and themes initially covered by the survey.

There was a particular focus on the following:

- Finding out more about the understanding, perceptions and perspectives of the Foundation among grantees and unsuccessful applicants
- Understanding how they think the Foundation compares to other grant-makers across a broad range of areas

nfpSynergy interviewed **12** key stakeholders in **July 2019**. The numbers break out as follows:

Application successful/unsuccessful	Number of interviews
Grantees	6
Unsuccessful applicants	6
Annual income	Number of interviews
£100-500k	1
£500k-1m	2

£1m-5m	2
£5m-10m	1
£1m-5m	1
£5m-£10m	1
£10m-50m	1
£50m+	3
Region	Number of interviews
East of England	3
Yorkshire & the Humber	1
North West	1
North East	1
South East	2
South West	2
Midlands	1
All	1
Sector	Number of interviews
University	3
Health & Disability	5
Cultural	4

## Executive summary

### 1. The Wolfson Foundation has an excellent reputation

In both phases of the research, grantees and unsuccessful applicants spoke very highly of the Wolfson Foundation in a number of areas. These areas included being highly respected, trustworthy and very knowledgeable in your work with grantees. There were also positive comments around how approachable the Wolfson Foundation is, with 96% of grantees saying the Wolfson Foundation understands their organisation and its aims.

### 2. Application process is seen as appropriate, particularly the first stage

There was broad support for how the Wolfson Foundation has structured the application process, in particular, the first stage. Positive feedback focussed in particular on the flexibility of the first stage, and the lack of prescriptiveness. Unsuccessful applicants were

more likely to be critical about eligibility criteria not being clear enough, and there was feedback around communication of timescales once a proposal had been submitted. However, the application process is seen as reasonable for the size of grant applicants are applying for, with particular positives around the website.

### 3. Wolfson Foundation staff are very approachable and helpful

Many participants in the research mentioned positive experiences they had when interacting with Wolfson Foundation staff. This occurred in a number of different ways, from conversations with Paul Ramsbottom before applying for a grant, to calling up the office requesting information. Staff were seen as responsive and open. Some respondents did discuss how helpful it is to have site visits; however, given the accessibility of staff, one could question the benefit of this versus the cost. Though one area to discuss could be whether all applicants know that Wolfson Foundation staff are on hand?

### 4. Capital funding is valued in the current climate

The current funding environment is not easy for charities, particularly smaller charities. Core funding came up a number of times as a source of funding that is highly desirable, again particularly among smaller charities. However, when probed in the second phase of the research, the majority of participants saw the value in the Wolfson Foundation specialising in capital funding. There are not many capital funders and any decrease in funding would be a loss to the charity sector.

### 5. Can smaller organisations be better supported?

Throughout the research, it was very clear that the Wolfson Foundation supports a very wide range of organisations, with differing levels of grants and engagement. The non-prescriptive application process and approachable staff show the organisation has already taken significant steps to make any application to the Wolfson Foundation a straightforward process. But is there any more the Wolfson Foundation could be doing, particularly for the smallest and most vulnerable charities? Could the application process be streamlined for an organisation with an income below a certain threshold, or funding given in addition to capital funding to support the time taken to prepare an application to the Wolfson Foundation?

## Excellent reputation

- *"I wish there are more funders like Wolfson, who had this niche of funding capital development at such a large level because I think it's really important, it's really good." P1 (Grantee)*
- **"Trustworthy, principled and helpful"** (Charity working with older people) (online survey)

- *"I think a lot of patrons, Wolfson, Garfield Weston etc, have a very similar approach really and over the years - because they've all been around for some time now - have developed that into a very professional approach to funding, which is greatly appreciated by people such as ourselves, who are looking for matched funding." P8 (Grantee)*

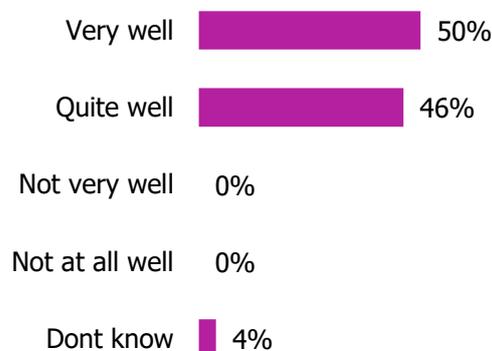
Grantees and unsuccessful applicants were united in their view that the Wolfson Foundation has an excellent reputation as a professional, long-standing, capital funder. Interview respondents commented on the Wolfson being very well known – always at the top a list of capital funders.

- *"They've got a very clear goal to fund excellence, primarily in universities, although I know they fund beyond universities...so, funding research excellence, or excellence and cultural provision...a prestigious name, giving large grants to support the very best work. To me that's what they stand for." P1 (Grantee)*
- *"Wolfson fit in very much towards the top end of what I like." P6 (Grantee)*
- *"They've been around a million years... they appear in every search that you use, regardless of what system that you use. They appear all over; one of the larger funders in terms of the value of the grants that they give. Very well known" P7 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*
- *"I think they often lead from the front, in terms of helping the charitable sector be better." P1 (Grantee)*
- *I think that Wolfson Foundation is one of the absolute best that there is going, because it's humbling...They are one of the greatest foundations that give to the heritage, along with Garfield Weston and the Sainsbury's." P2 (unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*

These findings from the in-depth telephone interviews confirmed what we found in the online survey with grantees and unsuccessful applicants. 96% of grantees said the Wolfson Foundation understood their organisations and its aims well. Similarly, 72% of grantees said the Wolfson Foundation was better than other funders at treating them with respect.

Unsuccessful applicants were a little less positive, with 34% saying the Wolfson Foundation was better than other funders at treating them with respect.

### Figure 1: How does the Wolfson Foundation understand organisations



*"How well do you feel the Wolfson Foundation understands your organisation and its aims?"*

Base: 155 grantees | Source: Survey of Wolfson Foundation applicants, Apr 19, nfpSynergy

In the online survey, there were a handful of comments around the formality of the Wolfson Foundation.

- *"Like Coutts Bank – **very large, quite formal, and scary to approach** but once you get an introduction, **very kind and accommodating**. You remember the process as being intimidating, but once you make the step, you're glad you took the decision to apply". (Hospice and/or palliative care organisation) (Online survey)*

In the depth telephone interviews we probed whether or not participants felt the Wolfson Foundation was unapproachable, but none shared this view.

- *"I have considerable experience of applying to different funders and each has a particular character when you get to know them. As such, I see The Wolfson Foundation as ensuring a fair but rigorous process, some other foundations have a lot more informal conversations which can help to target applications and understand what elements the foundation may be willing to fund, but I am unsure if this would affect the fairness of fair judgement of applications on what has been submitted." (Online survey)*

## Application Process

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During the first and second phase of the research, applicants were asked to provide their thoughts and perspectives on the first and second stages of the application process. Applicants during phase 1 and phase 2 of the research were asked to give their experiences of how straightforward they found the process along with their perspectives of time taken to do the application. We also asked applicants to give their opinion on the website, while we also gauged their perspectives of how helpful and communicative Wolfson Foundation staff were for their application.

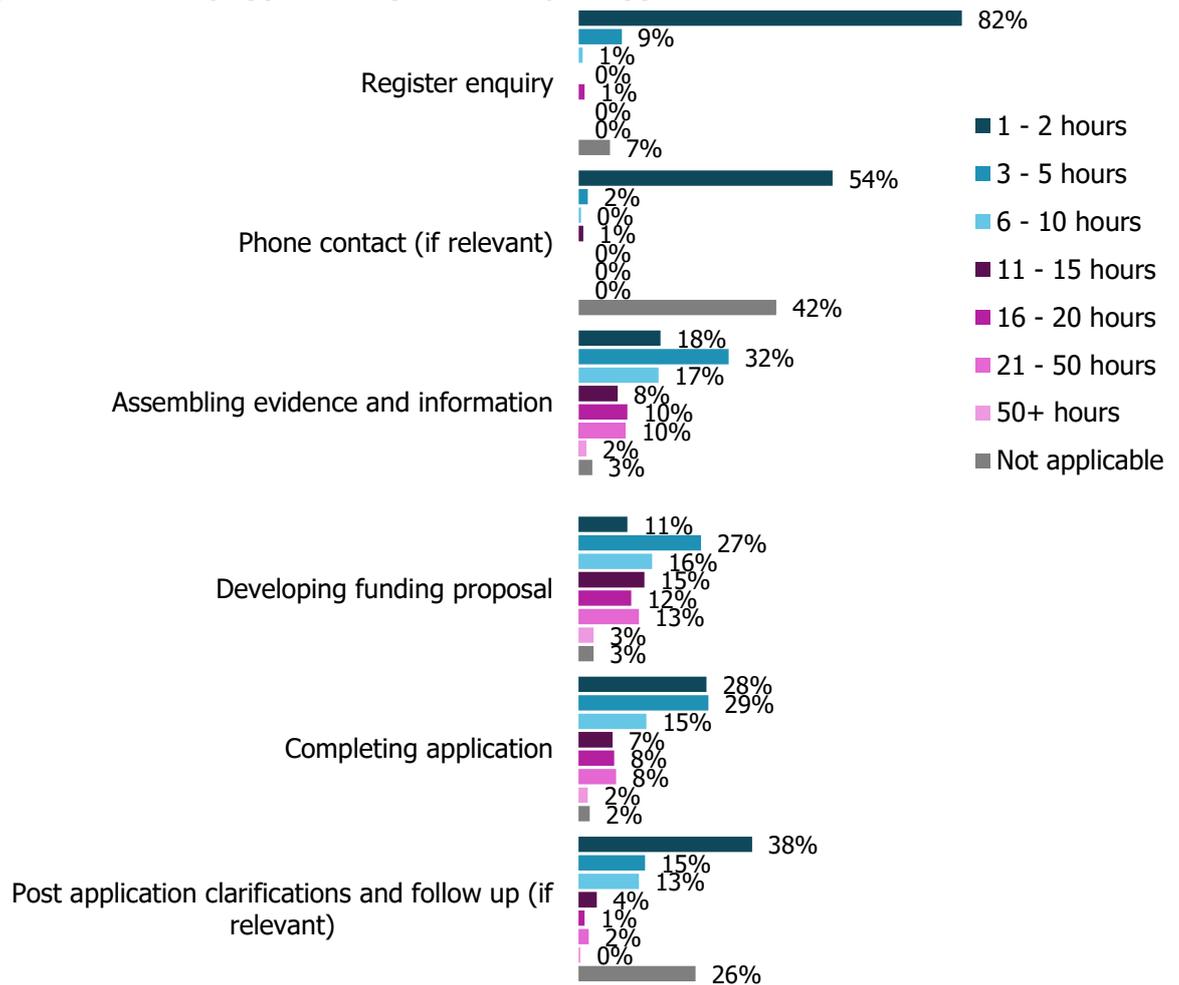
### Simple 1<sup>st</sup> Stage Process

Applicants were impressed that the first stage was fairly simple, appreciating the fact that not so much time had to be spent on this stage. Applicants also liked the freedom the first stage provided them, allowing them to write the application around the specifics of the project they were seeking funding for. Some applicants also appreciated the fact that the Wolfson Foundation didn't ask for overly complex information, making the process clear and easy to follow.

- *"...Round one application, that was perfectly reasonable; and all the questions were entirely correct and I understand why they were asked, and I have no issue with them. P2 (unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*
- *"Stage one is nice and clear - and you get a clear answer quite quickly from the Foundation to see if they want you to go to stage two." P1 (Grantee)*
- *"I think it's good that the first stage is fairly short, so you're not spending a lot of time doing a first stage that might not be successful, so that's really good." P3 (Grantee)*

- “What I liked that was particularly good, is that it's not a prescriptive form, it's a proposal. It was very clear what they were looking for in terms of maximum length and what the structure should be. But even within that structure, I felt it just gave us the opportunity to tell our story in the way we wanted to tell it.” P6 (Grantee)
- “It was quite straightforward. It didn't ask for anything that we couldn't provide. It asked some sensible questions about timetable and planning permission and things...that seemed reasonable and organised. It didn't ask for a particularly complicated amount of financial information, which is good. We could have provided additional information but not needing to do so is fine, we sent accounts. No, generally, I thought it was very straightforward.” P9 (Unsuccessful 1<sup>st</sup> stage)

**Figure 2: How long applicants spent on stage 1 application**



“How many hours would you estimate you spent on the following aspects of the first stage application to the Wolfson Foundation?”

Base: 329 grantees/applicants | Source: Survey of Wolfson Foundation applicants, Apr 19, nfpSynergy

For survey respondents in phase 1 of the research, developing a funding proposal was perceived to be the lengthiest part of the first stage of the application process. Over a quarter had spent 3-5 hours writing the proposal though 16% indicated they had spent over 21 hours on this particular process. This captures the fairly large variance in time taken on this stage and it is important to

recognise that such differentiation could be dependent upon the level of experience each grant writer had as well as the sector they were working in.

We explored how long the first stage of the application was taking in the telephone interviews. This phase also revealed that applicants were taking very different amounts of time to complete the application.

- *"Stage one, once you know which project, you're applying for...there's not much work in it, but you do a lot of work nuancing and boiling down and getting ahead on a project and making it clear and punchy and understandable. So maybe, I don't know, ten hours? Twenty hours on stage one?...And if it goes through to stage two, it's probably the equivalent of, maybe, I don't know, if you add it altogether, maybe three weeks full-time work?" P1 (Grantee)*
- *"It doesn't take me that long to do it; about an hour." P2 (unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*
- *"I guess the Stage 1, it probably would take a day, a couple of days, maybe. If it, if, you know, you had some good information to hand, if it was scoping out something quite new it would take you longer." P3 (Grantee)*
- *"I think I spent about half a day, writing it, and then a colleague spent about three hours amending it, and then I probably spent about the equivalents again. So, probably total of a day and a half." P9 (Unsuccessful 1<sup>st</sup> stage)*

## Uncertainties on timescales following submission of proposals

Despite the straightforwardness of the first stage, some participants in the telephone interviews expressed uncertainty over second stage timescales. This included concerns surrounding the submission date for stage 2 applications, meaning that first stage applications sent in late would only have a relatively short period of time to submit the full application at stage 2. There was also some frustration that there were no timescales given on when a decision to their application would be made at either stage of the application process.

- *"...the only thing I found is that if you submit quite close to the deadline, the sort of final date for Stage 1, it then takes them about a month, I think, to come back to you and say "Yes, go ahead," but then, you then usually will have about, only about a month to put in your full application. So, it's actually beneficial to put it in earlier, rather than just on the deadline which is often what I do." P3 (Grantee)*
- *"It never actually says, "After Stage One, we'll get back to you in six weeks" or eight weeks or whatever; if they do, they very rarely stick to it. Then if you get through to Stage Two, that's still no guarantee that you're going to get the money. So you do all the things that you have to do for Stage 2 documentation, which is much more involved; and again, you still don't know how long it's going to take. You could look on the Charity Commission website and find out when the Board of Trustees meet, but it doesn't necessarily follow that two weeks after the Board of Trustees have met, that all the decisions have been*

*made and all the letters are going to get sent out. There's no way of knowing, so it just makes the entire process much longer from start to finish."* P7 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)

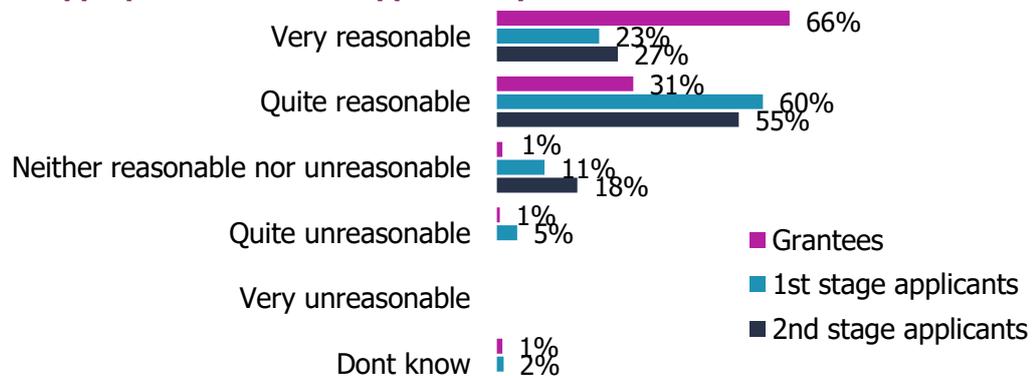
## 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of the process reasonably straightforward, although there were some difficulties interpreting criteria

Applicants who were successful in going through to the second stage were of the opinion that stage 2 was reasonable in both scale and time while recognising the more thorough and complex nature of it in comparison to their experiences on stage 1.

- *"I think the second stage is fine, it all makes sense, the sort of information that they require. So, you know, it's all, it's all very clear and fairly standard, straightforward to do, really."* P3 (Grantee)

The second stage is seen as more thorough and complex, but this is considered proportionate to the size of the grant. This was reflected in both phase 1 and phase 2 of the research with two-thirds of grantees feeling the size of the application felt very reasonable for the size of the grant they were applying for.

**Figure 3: Appropriateness of the application process**



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

Base: 329 grantees/applicants | Source: Survey of Wolfson Foundation applicants, Apr 19, nfpSynergy

- *"Stage two is a bit more complex, but that's absolutely understandable, because you're kind of hoping for higher six figures or lower seven figures, that's what you're hoping for, so it's a large sum of money. So, I've absolutely no issue at all with the large amount of work needed to do that. To be honest, I'd worry if you didn't. If it was a three-page application for one and a half million pounds, I'd think this doesn't seem right."* P1 (Grantee)

However, the in-depth telephone interviews conducted during phase 2 of the research revealed that some second stage applicants had difficulty with the guidelines and criteria. Some did not understand what exactly it was the Wolfson Foundation wanted to get out of funding their project, while others noted that the line of questioning within the application was still fairly generic compared to other grant-makers. Despite this, there was appreciation given to the freedom

provided by not following such strict criteria within the application process, saying it gave them the ability to model the application around the specifics of the project they were seeking funding for.

- *"We would have had a better opportunity with clearer guidelines about what it is the Foundation wanted to get out of funding a project like ours."* P5 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)
- *"Well, I thought I had (understood the criteria); I thought I'd nailed it, and in actual fact the 2018 application did get through to Stage Two and then failed at Stage Two. So, when I rewrote this one, I sort of re-examined it in a great deal more detail, and I think I know what I got wrong with the first one. And I'm hoping that I've nailed it in the second one. Although I think all the information is in there, I actually think as far as Wolfson is concerned, you need to read the eligibility and the criteria two or three times; and really take it in, and maybe print it off and highlight some stuff and underline some stuff. Because it became clear to me what I got wrong."* P7 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)
- *"I didn't think it was particularly transparent; and I only say that, because I remember being surprised that we were as encouraged to submit an application, because of my awareness of Wolfson as a capital funder... We would have had a better opportunity with clearer guidelines about what it is the foundation wanted to get out of funding a project like ours. One that wasn't in bricks and mortar or a research post."* P5 (unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)
- *"...although they are clear, they are still quite general; they're quite generic - where some funders will say that they want to fund something more specific the Wolfson criteria are general."* P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)
- *"Stage Two, I suppose they would say, being the devil's advocate, they've tightened things up but I think that in tightening it up, respectfully they've lost sight of what matters. And what matters is the people on the ground; it's all fine and dandy to fill these endless questions, but what matters is, are the people responsible for the project going to deliver it? Do you have faith in them? Do you have confidence in them?"* P2 (unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)
- *"I actually think the guidance is really good, and I think it gives a fair amount of freedom; but they obviously make sure they get what they need... with Wolfson, I do like the fact that you can sort of model it to your project, rather than trying to fit with a form. It might not work for everyone; it's something I do come up against working for university, is exactly that."* P12 (Grantee)

## Universities spend a significant amount of time on the application

One theme that cropped up during the in-depth interviews centred on the more extensive nature of the application process for universities applying for more sizeable grants. It was often the case that these types of applications were far more lengthy in time taken to complete as such cases saw the application process involve a number of people beyond the chief grant writer, including academics which saw the length of time taken to complete the application extended. This made it a more complicated process.

- *"The big science capital bids, you're hoping to get one to two million-ish; so again, from our perspective that's a very significant application. Even the first stages of both those two applications were weeks of work by several individuals; and the second stage capital bid was again, several weeks of work by several individuals... But I suppose if you were to add*

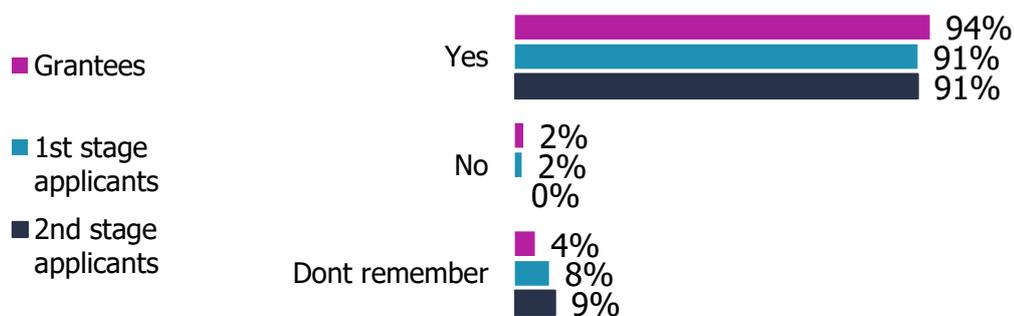
*up several staff members across several weeks, we're talking hundreds of hours; it's a hugely complicated process and very time consuming. I know in some institutions, there are people whose - and it's virtually their only job - is to work on these kinds of applications, just because there is so much work involved."* P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)

- *"I always think it's really good actually; it's hard work in some ways, especially when you're in a fundraiser role - it's not Wolfson that make it hard work - working with academic colleagues to pull together the information that's needed, and then being able to articulate it in a way that meets with the approval of the academics, as well as managing to meet with the requirements of Wolfson in terms of then going out to peer review."* P12 (Grantee)
- *"What I've found is that the academics that I work with, because obviously, I'm an expert in nothing, apart from writing grant applications...So, I'm not the academic expert, I always work with people who are, and they're often a bit thrown by the lack of very specific rules for everything."* P1 (Grantee)

## Website widely used and seen as very helpful

We found out during phase 1 of the project that the vast majority of respondents to the survey used the Wolfson Foundation website at some point to help them with their application.

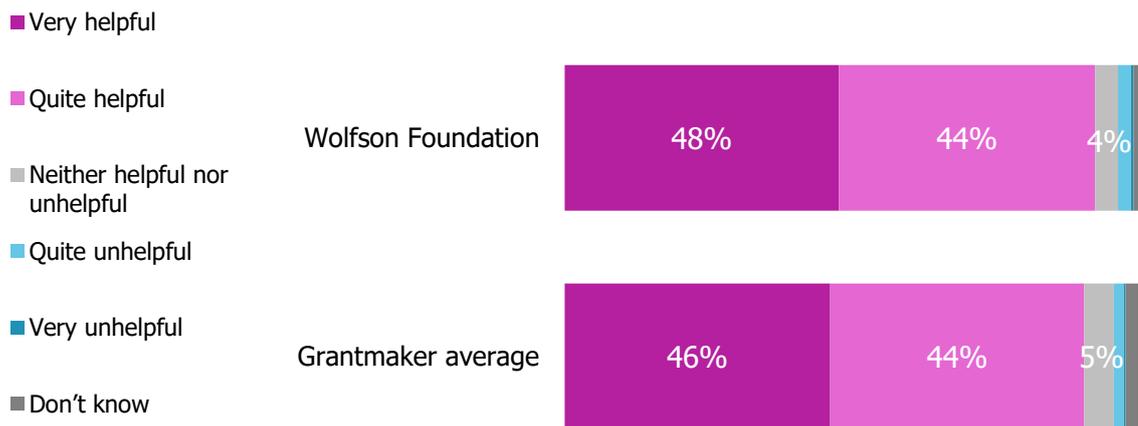
**Figure 4: Use of website**



"Did you use the Wolfson Foundation website to access information to help you with your application?"

Base: 329 grantees/applicants | Source: Survey of Wolfson Foundation applicants, Apr 19, nfpSynergy

Survey participants and interviewees were extremely complimentary of the website and found it to be a very useful source in helping them fill in their grant application. In the survey of Wolfson Foundation applicants in April 2019, 92% of respondents found the website to be either very helpful or quite helpful.

**Figure 5: Helpfulness of website**

"How helpful did you find the Wolfson Foundation website in helping you to access the information you needed to submit your application?"

Base: 329 grantees/applicants | Source: Survey of Wolfson Foundation applicants, Apr 19, nfpSynergy

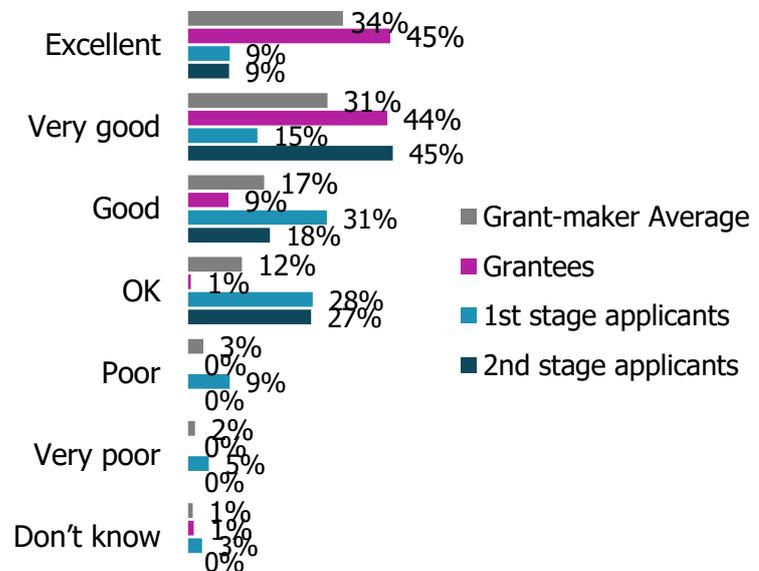
These findings were confirmed in the in-depth interviews, many of whom noted the website's clarity, the level of relevant information provided and how easy it was to use. Interviewees also noted how helpful it was to see case studies of previous grantees included on the website, helping to give them a better perspective of the type of projects that Wolfson funded. Other interviewees had also commented on the new website (launched earlier this year), noting that it improved upon the previous website's high standards particularly by becoming easier to navigate as well as looking better overall.

- "I like the clarity of information. I thought it provided all the information that was needed, on the criteria against which you needed to provide information. And because the application was structured it was quite clear to refer back and find out what you needed to say and what information was asked for." P9 (Unsuccessful 1<sup>st</sup> stage)
- "I think it's clear to understand what the background is of Wolfson: when it was established and what your...what's the word I'm looking for, just the criteria really...it's easy to use. It's good to see what you've funded before, because it makes you look and think, "Oh, well they funded them." P4 (Grantee)
- "It's probably clearer and more user friendly than it than it used to be; I think it's easier to click through for what you want, both the headline information and the more detailed information. I didn't particularly think it was terrible website before, but I can see that that this one is much clearer and it's much easier to navigate than the previous one. I think it just looks better than the old one, I think, in terms of finding your way around it." P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)
- "I think they've updated their website in the last couple of two/three months, and I think that's now very, very clear; so, on the whole, I think it's a very positive experience, and they're a good funder to work with." P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)

Overall the experience of the application process for applicants was positive. 98% of grantees felt the experience to be Excellent, Very good or Good (45% alone finding it excellent). Unsuccessful applicants were a little less enthusiastic but still broadly positive of their experiences with 55% of

unsuccessful applicants at the first stage indicating their experience was Excellent, Very good or Good. By comparison, 72% of applicants who were unsuccessful at the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of the process said similar about their experience.

**Figure 6: Ranking the application process**



"How would you rate your experience of the application process?"

Base: 4,000 grantees/applicants across 6 grant-makers | Source: Grant-makers benchmark, Apr 19, nfpSynergy

*"I'd just say that I think Wolfson is one of the best. It is thorough, and I can't knock it."* P4 (Grantee)

## Communications during and after the application

In both phases of the research, applicants were very complimentary of the communications they had with Wolfson Foundation staff.

Interviewees during phase 2 of the research were impressed by the responsiveness and ease of access in talking to a relevant staff member either by phone, email or face to face meetings. This helped them overcome any issues encountered within their application or issues that cropped up with projects amongst successful grantees once the funding was awarded.

- *"We had significant telephone contact and our point of contact was extremely helpful and supportive." (Online survey)*
- *"It's great, as I said before, they're very open, very responsive." P1 (Grantee)*
- *"They're very responsive...you know, it's easy to talk to them by phone, but they're also very responsive by email and their reporting is quite light touch, so you know, that's really refreshing." P3 (Grantee)*
- *"When I went in search of information, I had to call the head office... I can't recall what exactly for, but if I rang up. It wasn't an issue to receive information." P10 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*
- *"[He and I] had probably about half an hour phone interview with Paul Ramsbottom. So to get direct advice from the director of the Foundation, that was extremely exemplary. We had a meeting with them in London, so just knowing that you could have that direct conversation with the very high level in the organisation." P6 (Grantee)*

Such communicative standards by the Wolfson Foundation was compared favourably to other grant-making organisations. This was reflected in a case during the in-depth interviews where the Wolfson Foundation's openness and transparency were complimented upon.

*"I think they're very open and transparent...they have a staff team and they're set up and are willing to talk to you, which I think is really good. Whereas with some funders, probably because they don't have the resources, don't want to talk by phone, don't want to be bothered with email. So, you know, you can't really engage with them in the same way. So, I think that's a real positive that they are able to actually talk to people." P3 (Grantee)*

## Reporting back process

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Grantees were impressed by the easy reporting process by which they would update the Wolfson Foundation on the progress of their project.

Many believed that the process was straightforward and not too arduous. Others commented that the reporting back form gave grantees the flexibility to put across their project in a way that didn't restrict them in terms of length. Grantees believed that the reporting gave them the opportunity to provide all the relevant details which was easy enough to pull together while appreciating the fact that the Wolfson Foundation was not asking for too much information.

- *"If another funder was asking me, say - I won't the name another funder as an example - but if I was having this conversation and you were representing another funder, I'd maybe say, "Look at Wolfson's progress reports, because they do everything that's needed without be too onerous." P1 (Grantee)*
- *"You know, they're all so generic. It's the same thing with all trusts, though, when there's a standard application form: they're all so generic that sometimes you can't really put across your project. With Wolfson I think, pretty much, yes. But there are some that you just can't, especially when you're restricted to the number of words, number of letters, so many characters and all that sort of thing. It's ridiculous." P4 (Grantee)*
- *"The reporting to Wolfson's been fine; I probably spend no more than a day on each interim report- probably part of a day...but it's not onerous." P6 (Grantee)*
- *"Relatively straightforward...I find the Wolfson process actually really concise and straightforward, and it allows us to actually update on the project; let the foundation know where we are, what's going on - how it's all working out financially, which I think is great - and they know that they would come back to us and ask if they wanted addition information...; I think they've honed it down to a point of the information that they need, to be reassured that the project's progressing as it should. I think that is much appreciated in the sense that not being asked for copious amounts of information. But obviously in many ways, we'd be more than happy to provide that if that's what they'd like to receive." P12 (Grantee)*

The six-month intervals at which grantees had to send reports was considered to be appropriate particularly for those grantees involved in projects with a lengthy time span.

- *"I think six monthly updates are good for projects that have a longer time span... You don't want to be writing updates every five minutes, sort of thing, but you need to keep your funders informed." P8 (Grantee)*

## Should the Wolfson Foundation continue to focus on capital funding?

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In the first phase of the research, we asked grantees and applicants what types of projects the Wolfson Foundation should fund. A number of respondents (particularly from smaller organisations) raised core funding as an area that would be very helpful to them.

- *"Some funders are moving towards providing core funding and recognising that each organisation is best-placed to know how to meet the needs of its area without being restructured to a particular project but still acting within a sector" (Online Survey)*

This demand for core funding is understandable given the context within which the Wolfson Foundations applicants operate. One of the first questions we asked in the online survey was 'what is the biggest challenge your organisation is currently facing?' The answers were illuminating. Firstly, they demonstrate the breadth of grantees and applicants the Wolfson Foundation works with; from parish churches to organisations that are delivering £20m capital projects.

- *"Successfully delivering our £20m capital project on time and to budget whilst ensuring we maintain a high level of customer service and experience across the other areas of the museum."* (Online survey)
- *"Ongoing revenue costs to support the relatively inflexible salary costs of maintaining a symphony orchestra in the regions."* (Online survey)
- *"We have one of the largest parish churches in England, Grade I listed, very beautiful with many important and interesting features but now requiring urgent repair work which we are unable to fund ourselves."* (Online survey)

The answers also highlighted the financial pressures that many organisations face, with some particularly referencing core funding.

- *"Government spending cuts for schools and especially the funding issues in Special schools."* (Online survey)
- *"Long-term, core funding. We feel lucky to have received project-specific grants, but do not have the degree of financial security required to really invest in making a step-change in extending the reach of our work to meet the needs of our beneficiaries. We also understand that our charity's need for more funding is shared by many and inevitably means someone loses out (finite funding available)."* (Online survey)
- *"The biggest challenge facing our organisation is without doubt raising core funding for the day to day running of the organisation. We are trying to overcome this challenge by developing income generating services that will raise un-restricted money to offset core running costs"* (Online survey)
- *"Reduction of long-term local funding as a result of the cessation of our local authority."* (Online survey)
- *"Currently we are managing our budget which has been dramatically cut in education. This has affected the quantity of subject available for students as smaller class sizes can no longer be taught. For instance, music is no longer taught in KS3 (11-13 year olds)."* (Online survey)
- *"A continuing reduction in statutory funding and the need to develop diverse income streams in order to maintain high levels of care for people with learning disabilities and/or autism."* (Online survey)
- *"We fundraise to meet the income gap between the cost of the service we provide and the fees charged to service users. At the same time all capital development is financed through fundraising. The gap is getting wider and the funding resources narrower."* (Online survey)

We explored the topic of core funding in the second phase of the research, within the context of the Wolfson Foundation being a specialist capital funder. Almost all the participants acknowledged

that this is a complex area, with many aware that if a funder moves away from one type of funding, less is available for another. For many, the Wolfson Foundation is seen as a crucial and needed capital funder, any move away from this would be unwelcome.

- *"I guess there are maybe 10 in the UK that will fund large capital projects; and other than that, you have to go to commercial sponsors... It's the hardest [trying to raise capital funding]; it is the most difficult area to be successful in, without a doubt.*
- *"...clearly if they moved into funding projects and core costs, then I guess that reduces their ability to fund capital. We probably wouldn't want to see that." P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*
- *"...we approach Wolfson for capital projects; that's how we work... they are massively valued." P12 (Grantee)*
- *"There are so few capital project funders about, from a personal point of view; I'd much prefer them to stay as a capital project funder." P7 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*

Interviewees who represented cultural / heritage organisations or universities were particularly keen to express the importance of capital funding from the Wolfson Foundation.

- *"In terms of scientific infrastructure, they are one of the only capital funders. I guess it's only an organisation the size of Wolfson (and some of the other really big foundations) that can afford to do that. From that point of view if they moved away from that, then that would close down quite a lot of opportunities. From our perspective, there is definitely a need for an organisation that will supply that level of capital funding." P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*
- *"Absolutely [there is a need]...whether that be building a new building, refurbishing one, putting in new galleries or whatever - the need for capital is always there. Mind you, the need for revenue is sometimes even more difficult, because there are fewer revenue funders than there are capital funders. But we couldn't develop museums or any Historic Site without foundations like Wolfson who are happy to provide funding." P8 (Grantee)*
- *"I think a lot of funders support the collections and conservation side of museums, or the education and community side of museums. It's really nice to have a funder who focuses on capital infrastructure because it is, obviously, often the largest cost in a project. It is possible to find money for the activity side of things, both on a smaller scale and just because there's more funders for it, and actually, the largest proportion of the funding that is needed for something of this scale is capital. Because it's the buildings that cost money, not the people. I mean, people cost money too but they're much easier to fundraise for." P9 (Unsuccessful 1<sup>st</sup> stage)*

However, some of the smaller charities we interviewed were more likely to stress the importance of core funding. One participant suggested that the Wolfson Foundation look into offering some core funding (whilst acknowledging it is important to get a balance).

- *"I think there's definitely a role for capital funding. I think they should look at some of it being core funding, but I think that's a very complicated balance and I certainly wouldn't want to see the capital funding side radically diminished." P9 (Unsuccessful 1<sup>st</sup> stage)*

- *"Revenue funding is obviously always a challenge; in some ways capital is easier to get than revenue. Not personally to me - I only deal with capital projects - but the managing director would no doubt say that he spends a lot of time on the challenge of revenue funding." P8 (Grantee)*
- *"I think it's useful to have a capital funder. But from our perspective it, you know, it limits what we can apply for, essentially, because we don't have a lot of capital products... Obviously, revenue funding is obviously often the hardest thing to get money for, so it's always welcome to have another funder that will also look at, at salaries and project costs." P3 (Grantee)*

## Where can the Wolfson Foundation improve?

In phase 1 of the research, we identified the following areas where the Wolfson Foundation could improve.

- Grantees were not as positive around the length of time to make an application and speed of decision following an application when comparing the Wolfson Foundation to others
- Unsuccessful applicants of the Wolfson Foundation were more likely to receive feedback on why their application was unsuccessful than the grant-maker average. However, 38% of unsuccessful applicants at the first stage and 27% of unsuccessful applicants at the second stage said they didn't receive feedback where they would have found it useful.
- 24% of unsuccessful applicants said the Foundation was not as good as other funders in understanding them as an applicant.
- Grantees and unsuccessful applicants would like more 'face time' with Wolfson Foundation staff - a testament to how respected the Foundation is

We explored some of these themes in the interviews and identified some additional areas that the Wolfson Foundation might want to consider taking action on. We have already addressed how long it takes to write an application and how long it takes to the Wolfson Foundation to respond to applications earlier in this report.

### Feedback for unsuccessful applicants

There were a range of views and experiences on feedback from the Wolfson Foundation. One unsuccessful applicant who was declined at the second stage recited their experience:

- *It is very generic. It normally starts out, "We are so over-subscribed. We've had so many good projects". When you read that first sentence, you know it's going to be, "And so we are extremely sorry that on this occasion," blah blah. Standard. But then usually, I think,*

*towards the bottom, you get an offer, "If you would like to discuss this further, please call", which is very unusual for grant funders. Normally on their website you get disclaimers saying "We don't have enough people to get into feedback and discussion about why it worked and why it didn't work, and the decision of the Board of Trustees is final." So Wolfson are different in that respect." P7 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*

- *"We were encouraged to contact him for feedback; and the director here contacted him for feedback and that was really useful. I know that they are always willing to meet and discuss things, and they're very helpful and open." P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*

However, this offer of further communication on feedback was not experienced by everyone.

*"I guess it would be definitely great to have (more feedback), but... I mean, I fully appreciate that feedback, because again, if you're inundated, the organisation has to make a decision who they fund because they could never fund everyone." P10 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*

Finally, a second stage unsuccessful applicant suggested that for large grants (like the one they were applying for) the Wolfson Foundation could offer feedback after the first stage to highlight any concerns or weaker areas of the application. This is particularly in the context of the big investment of time the grantee's organisation had invested into the application.

*"The only issues is, if you get through Stage One and are allowed to submit a second stage application, I guess having some more detailed feedback at that stage would be helpful. I think sometimes they do highlight things at that stage that are potentially missing, but my impression is, I've only done one application that got through to Stage Two, I can't speak with huge experience but I think it would have been helpful to have had more feedback after Stage One for organisations that get through to Stage Two. It could highlight potential areas of weakness or areas that needs strengthening at that stage; I think that might be helpful." P11 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*

## Should the Foundation offer more site visits?

In the online survey, some respondents stated that they would find some face to face engagement with Wolfson Foundation staff or trustees helpful, particularly at the early stages of an application. Many of the participants in the second phase of the research confirmed that they prefer to welcome funders to their charities.

- *"I think it's always really helpful to us - hopefully to them - if people actually come and look at the site. No matter how many pictures and words you write - which you have a limited number to be able to do any application normally nowadays - being able to have someone here on site and actually walk them round and explain about the site, because we are the only china clay museum, so it's not as if they'll come across another one - that I always felt very, very helpful, whenever we did give a funder a site tour before they made a decision." P8 (Grantee)*
- *"I personally prefer face-to-face time where you can talk things through with an individual more clearly. I mean, that's always a lot more helpful. I appreciate the difficulties (in not getting a face to face meeting): if you are a national grant giving organisation people wouldn't be able to sort of to commute out the; I mean, the logistics are a lot more difficult than when you're a more local funder." P10 (Unsuccessful 2<sup>nd</sup> stage)*

- *"The only other time when it's handy to have face-to-face time is - I mentioned stage zero – so, the initial advice from Paul regarding which project might be the most likely to fly with the foundation in terms of getting a grant." P1 (Grantee)*

However, as stated earlier in the report, a number of grantees were very positive about how approachable Wolfson Foundation staff are. As one of these quotes alludes to, there would, of course, be resource implication for the Wolfson Foundation to start visiting applicants or grantees.

## Technical details

Some minor points of criticism regarding invoicing aspects of certain projects were raised in the interviews during the second phase of research. In a case where funding was awarded for upgrading and maintaining facilities/equipment, a grantee found that invoicing for each individual component was time consuming. This was claimed to be unlike most other funders, many of whom were satisfied with reporting back on the financial breakdown of how the money was spent instead of going through an invoice procedure.

In addition to this, another case highlighted that the funding did not cover for other essential fees on a capital project, notably architect's fees. This caused confusion in providing accurate documentation on the project when removing such expenses from the project cost.

- *"...if you're like us, sort of got a hundred and fifty thousand pounds worth of equipment, they have to provide all the invoices for each bit of equipment, some of which may be fifty pounds, up to sort of two thousand pounds on each invoice. So it adds a bit of extra time, just in collating those claims, getting all the invoices in order, checking them all...A lot of funders just give you the grant and then you report back and maybe provide a financial breakdown of what's being spent. That would probably be easier than sort of providing each invoice." P3 (Grantee)*
- *"So, the project had things in like the professional fees and all that sort of thing. So, I had to change everything. I had to recalculate everything without any of that stuff in, if that makes sense? So, all of our documentation just gave the overall project course, and it was broken down in this way. But Wolfson didn't care about that." P4 (Grantee)*

## Additional support for small charities

Challenges surrounding small charities and their chances of succeeding in such applications were also raised during the second phase of research. In one case within the heritage sector, issues surrounding the lack of expertise in the area of fundraising due to small staff numbers and the need for funding to help develop the museum to meet funding criteria were raised. Such cases believed that there was a lack of understanding by the Wolfson Foundation on their part.

*"I think small museums - even more so than large museums - struggle because they don't have designated staff or specialist staff for fundraising. So, it's people like myself who are doing it on top of every other part of their day job. Which is something that tends not to be the case for large organisations, who probably have a member of staff whose entire background and specialty is in writing trust grant applications and actually has the time to do it, and isn't doing it in addition to everything else, on top of everything else and in their*

*evenings. I think that small museums are closed out of a number of the application processes - like this one - by not meeting either an income threshold; which was the case for a couple I couldn't apply to because we just didn't have either enough visitors or enough income to meet the threshold to be considered at all. Which is obviously very difficult because the only way to reach either of those thresholds is to do the kind of project that we're doing to increase our visitor figures, to increase our own income and to become a stronger organisation.*

*It's very difficult without investment from outside. So, it requires something like this level of investment to be able to kick start that process of change, that step change that gives the organisation a chance to survive and to flourish. And I think there are small museums all over the country facing the same set of problems: which is they don't have the staff capacity, the staff specialism or the investment to actually continue that level of operation; particularly with things council cuts at the moment, everybody's really having to be creative about where they can find their funding from.*

*So, it is frustrating that there are funds like this, where the fact that we're basically not significant enough on a national level means that we're not able to get funding... I certainly think that there is a lack of understanding of smaller museums, at a high level across a lot of funds and across a lot of organisations, because they're not the ones that get the national press because they're not the national sized museums. I can't comment on the Wolfson Foundation's own knowledge. I don't know." P9 (Unsuccessful 1<sup>st</sup> stage)*

## 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 health 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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