

## **Response to the Grantee and Applicant Perceptions Audit Report 2019**

One of our key values is an attempt to set the highest standards for our work and to reflect continually on how we might improve. We aim to be a responsible and engaged grant-maker and feel that it is crucial to listen to (and act on) the voices of our applicants and grant-holders. In our *Strategy, 2017-2019*, we committed to undertaking an external survey of applicant opinions and, in 2019, we commissioned nfpSynergy to conduct an independent audit of our application process. The intention was to find out more about applicants' understanding, perceptions and opinions of us as an organisation and our grant application process. It was important to us to include the voices of those who were unsuccessful as well as successful in their approaches to us, and to hear from organisations across all of our varied funding programmes.

We are grateful to nfpSynergy for their work on this survey but, most of all, we are grateful to all of the applicants and grant-holders who responded to the survey and who agreed to be interviewed. Without this time, which was given freely and generously (and of course anonymously), this report would not have been possible. We are therefore pleased to share the outcome of the audit in advance of the launch of our new *Strategic Framework* later this month. We are delighted by the positive feedback, including that 96% of grantees say we understand their organisations and their aims, and we look forward to improving wherever possible.

A response to some of the points raised in the report is below.

### **Application process**

We are reassured to know that our two stage application process, with a relatively light touch Stage 1, is viewed positively by applicants. We will continue to manage our process in this way to ensure that applicants are not spending unnecessary time on their applications. We are also glad to know that our Stage 2 application is considered proportionate, although we recognise that some applicants would prefer more personalised guidance notes. Our guidance is intentionally broad in order to suit the full and diverse range of organisations who submit applications. We hope to give applicants the space and flexibility to present their project as they see fit. We regularly update our guidance notes when applicants indicate that more clarity is needed and, to support our second stage applicants better, they are given the direct contact details of a member of the Grants Team who is able to offer targeted advice if needed.

We are delighted to hear that our website is widely used and seen as helpful. It was comprehensively redesigned and updated in 2019 in order to make it easier to navigate, and we will continue to update it in response to feedback. We have, for example, now made our decision-making timescales more prominent.

### **Communications during and after the application**

We believe that good communication is beneficial to our applicants as well as to us. Our Grants Team strives to run a smooth process and to be responsive and friendly. We are glad therefore

to have received positive feedback on this. As well as comprehensive guidance on our website, we will continue to be available via telephone, email and (where possible and useful) meetings.

We recognise that there is a relatively lengthy period of time between submission of an application and receipt of a final decision, which can be frustrating for applicants but is also necessary to accommodate the two stage application, our rigorous peer review process and the large volume of applications we receive. We aim to be open about our decision-making process throughout this period and to inform applicants of the outcome as soon as we can.

### **Reporting back process**

Since it is our hope that grant holders dedicate their time and resources towards completing a successful project, we intentionally designed a flexible and light touch reporting process. Our intention is to ask only for the information that we need for our own due diligence/audit process and to monitor the progress of funded projects. We are glad to know that this light-touch is appreciated!

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

This is obviously a key question for us. We have noted the financial pressures that our applicants and grant-holders increasingly face and the debates in the sector about the overwhelming need for core funding. We were particularly interested therefore that the consensus among survey participants was that we are a crucial and much-needed capital funder, and that a move away from this specialist area would be unwelcome. These comments were taken on board by Trustees when they were reviewing Wolfson's strategic framework and, partly on the basis of advice received, we have decided to continue focussing on capital infrastructure and maintain our position as a specialist funder in this area.

### **Where can the Wolfson Foundation improve?**

#### Feedback

We understand that much time and energy is invested in applications to grant-makers, including Wolfson.

We have offered feedback (generally through telephone calls) to unsuccessful Stage 2 applicants for some years, partly to recognise the amount of work that goes into producing an application at this stage and to ensure that some useful learning comes from it. However, we endeavour to run an open and supportive process and recently introduced the provision of feedback at Stage 1, to help applicants understand why they were turned down and how they might be successful next time. Due to the volume of applications we receive, our feedback is necessarily brief but we intend to be as helpful as we can. Where applicants are successful at Stage 1 and we would like to see their Stage 2 application focussed on a particular element of their project, we also provide advice and feedback on this.

#### Site visits

We understand that applicants would welcome more face to face engagement, including site visits. Whilst we would also enjoy this, there are two key factors mitigating against it – one a practical point and one a point of principle.

First, Wolfson is run by a small team, managing grants of over £30 million each year and reaching across the full breadth of the UK. To undertake visits and meetings with every applicant and grant-holder would require a dramatically different staff structure to the one we currently have in place. Secondly, we want all applicants to have the same level of support and opportunity to access funding regardless of their location or previous level of engagement with Wolfson. We therefore do not generally undertake visits as part of the assessment process. Instead, our decision-making process is based on the expert advice we receive through the peer review process and our advisory panels. We hope that applicants find it reassuring that even if we don't visit, each decision is made carefully and thoughtfully. Where reviewers or panels raise questions or criticisms, we give applicants the opportunity to respond and for this to inform our assessment of their application.

### Technical details

We are aware that some grant holders find the actual claiming of their grant complicated. We need to balance the wish to make this as straightforward as possible, with the need to undertake sufficient due diligence. Our updated website includes a redesigned 'How to Claim' page, which we hope provides clarity for organisations who have just received a grant and want to know how to claim it. We will keep this under review and continue to make ourselves available to answer questions or queries grant-holders may have about our claim process.

### Additional support for small charities

We are aware that some smaller organisations feel unable to access our funding. An emphasis on major infrastructure tends to mean that we are funding larger organisations, although of course this is not invariably the case. We also do understand that many of the applications that we receive are submitted by staff who are undertaking this task in addition to their usual responsibilities and may not have fundraising experience. We don't turn down applications for being poorly drafted and will request clarity or additional information if necessary. Our team is always very happy to offer advice if needed, and our new website was designed partly with this audience in mind.

### **Looking forward**

Thank you again to everyone who responded to our survey. Our plan is to undertake another Grantee and Applicant Perceptions Audit within the next five years, using the outcome of the current report as a benchmark against which we can compare. However, we would like to emphasise that we are not simply interested in feedback within the confines of this formal process. We are interested and grateful for all feedback – whether positive or negative – at any time, and we will endeavour to act on suggestions for how we can improve wherever possible.