# The Art of Refusal:
# Promising Practice for Grant Makers and Grant Seekers
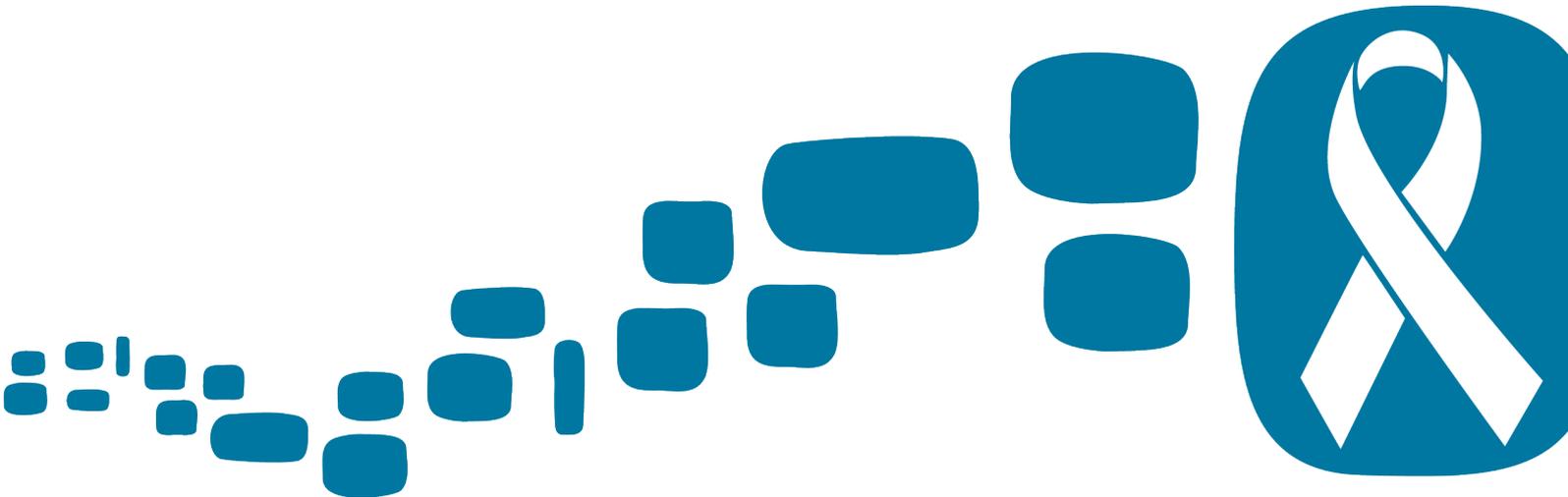
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2011

**The full report** of this research project, "*The art of refusal: experiences of grant makers and grant seekers*", provides the findings of a study of communication experiences and practices, at the point of grant refusal, among selected grant making and grant seeking organisations. Its context was the frustration and disappointment being experienced by many grant seekers in a period of enhanced competition for funding, alongside the multiple pressures facing grant makers, in responding to grant seekers' needs and in meeting their own range of obligations.

The overall purpose of the research was to support learning and improvement in policy and practice among grant makers and grant seekers.
A summary of the findings from the qualitative research undertaken for the project is provided at the end of this paper.

**In this practice paper**, we focus on the direct learning question posed by the research - '*what promising practices in grant refusal communications may be identified from grant makers' and grant seekers' perspectives on their experiences?*'
Many respondents during the research process highlighted what were, for them, preferred and promising practices in communicating and managing grant refusal among grant seekers and grant makers. These were sometimes their own approaches and sometimes those which they had observed and welcomed.

These insights, examples and possibilities are now distilled and presented below as promising practice learning and action points, illustrated by anonymous quotations taken from our research respondents.

## 1. Preliminary contact with grant makers

Not all grant makers are able to offer opportunities for preliminary pre-application contact, not least because of the workloads this generates for limited numbers of staff or volunteers. Where this is available, its range will vary; but it is often helpful in setting expectations around the decision making process which can you can expect.

Having identified whether or not the grant maker offers this option, rather than making a quick conversational call and then recalling 'other questions' you might have raised, work out in advance the kind of preliminary contact with grant makers you might need in connection with your application, how best you would use it, who should make it and when to do it.

**Plan ahead:** prepare in advance for preliminary contact which offers you a one-to-one conversation, however brief it may be. Bear in mind that funders may take more time to understand your organisation's offer and needs than you'd expect. Your organisation's role and needs may not be immediately clear or captivating to them and therefore sometimes the critical question of eligibility may not always be easy to judge.

As far as you can judge, select a way of approaching the grant maker that matches the sort of approach which they favour.

**Decide Whom To Approach**: Seeking preliminary contact is part of 'positioning' your organisation for funding. Accordingly, selecting the person to engage in preliminary contact on your behalf is critical. It will vary from organisation to organisation, but most often the chief executive may be best placed to take on this role.

> *"I never think to ring; I tend to think that they would be too busy".*

Establish whether anyone in your organisation, other than those currently involved with the application, has any personal or prior contacts with the funder. If so, then consider using them, sparingly, to make initial contact. This is especially the case if your preliminary contact takes the form of cold-calling rather than contact by invitation.

**Take Soundings:** If you have the time, then use your networks to try and gauge experiences of the funder in question, from among those who would be willing to share their knowledge and experience.

> *"Sometimes we go over the accounts of other charities in our sector and try to see where they've succeeded".*

Reach some fast judgments on what preliminary contact with a prospective funder might yield.  Don't overdo your welcome, unless specifically invited; remember not to appear to give the impression of wanting a grant seeker tutorial.

**Timing**: Beware of making any preliminary contact before your project concept is sufficiently clear since this makes it difficult for the funder to offer useful guidance, while leaving it too late may result in a lot of wasted work on an abortive application.

**Eligibility**: If it's a question of establishing eligibility, then is the information available from sources other than direct contact with the funder?  This could save time, although is less useful if you are hoping to indirectly solicit personal encouragement.

> *"I find that early contact is really very hit and miss and it's complicated by the fact that not all funders have sufficiently clear criteria".*

**The Criteria:** If the criteria are unclear, then this can be raised formally with the grant maker.  Where criteria are more general than specific, which from the grant maker's view might be to allow for flexibility, can you take advantage of this in your bid and match that flexibility?

> *"...but everyone says 'write in and see', but no one gives us an assessment of the real situation as an organisation with particular aims".*

**Judging the Response:**  Don't mistake politeness, or the encouragement of "please do apply", as a green light in respect of the bid's likely success. It may just be a function of the level of organisational exchange, or recognition that all inquirers should be dealt with fully and equally.

**Feedback:** At an appropriate time, consider feeding back directly to grant makers on the value of any preliminary contact, even if, or especially if, you decide not to go ahead with a bid.  This may be helpful to the grant maker in framing FAQ answers.

If you can, then consider any preliminary contact which you are able to make, beyond the formal exchange of criteria, as a small investment for both the future and current contacts.

## 2. Receiving and responding to the refusal

Try and make sure that you know the likely timescale, the way in which the decision will be conveyed and to whom. This will enable you to prepare yourself and colleagues to receive, and subsequently deal with, whatever decision may be taken.

> *"What we want above all is honesty but we don't get enough of it. We want to be told: 'this is where you have messed up' ".*

Where the grant maker offers an opportunity for further unspecified 'contact' or queries, respond appropriately but without expecting, or requiring, an opportunity to re-plead your application or revisit the decision.

## 3. Seeking and using tailored feedback and the reasons for refusal

As far as possible, establish in advance from the grant maker the nature and level of feedback, if any, that your organisation can expect and share this expectation with colleagues.

Recognise that grant makers offering generic or minimal feedback may do so because of staff pressures and costs. Where this is likely to be the case, then emphasise the value to your organisation of conveying the news in a timely fashion.

> *"We don't mind being given little feedback if the application wasn't a near miss, but if it is a near miss then we could do with more feedback".*

Identify who, from within your organisation, should be asking for further or more detailed feedback (not necessarily the bid writers) and at what level(s) from within the grant making body this should be sought.

If the application has been made in collaboration with a partner, take into account what will be involved in interpreting feedback of refused bids, either to or from partner organisations, and if possible share your concerns in advance.

Always take up any opportunities offered for gaining further feedback (e.g. through a time limited window for telephone comment) even where you feel that this may only be an expansion of information that has already been made available.

> *"Is it the way you wrote it, the project, or the limited funds? You can go on a course but you need to know; there is a need to learn from the refusal, if you think you've met the criteria".*

Where elaboration is sought on the feedback that you've received, identify particular learning points in relation to which you are seeking guidance, rather than a deconstruction of your entire bid.

Examples of areas in which it could be very helpful to receive feedback include the budget or financial projections which accompanied the application; any collaborative working arrangements; or the outcomes that you'd put forward.

> *"We would also like feedback on successful applications, since it is good to know why you have succeeded, too".*

Recognise the limitations of suggestions from grant makers regarding other funding sources and appreciate them as possibilities rather than recommended funds.

If feedback at grant refusal doesn't match the feedback received during application, bear in mind that the grants officers are not the decision makers.

Don't rule out making a response to the feedback that you have received from your grant maker, making it clear what – if anything – you valued from it.


## 4. Managing internal communication of grant refusal

Decide in advance how the news of refusal will be handled internally. Consider the following aspects carefully.

**Internal Dissemination**: Agreeing whether, how and by whom this news will be shared across staff, volunteers and users, as well as with the Board.

**Collective Responsibility**: Ensuring that some colleagues do not become isolated as a focus or source of criticism for the refusal, for example, fundraising employees.

**Stakeholder Dissemination**: Establishing, case by case, a view of whether the organisation would wish to tell others, formally and/or informally, about the refusal; and if so how this should be presented.

**Public dissemination**:  If news of the refusal is to be made public in any form, consider in advance what precisely you wish to gain from this and if so, via which routes.  Raising it as a general 'problem' via a membership organisation will generate a different response than a news item in local or specialised press.

**Partners**: If you have a shared bid, reach a broad agreement with a collaborative partner on all the preceding points, including timing.

Be prepared for the emotional impact of grant refusal, where possible limiting the time spent on absorbing it, to help avoid a sense of victimhood.

Try and be realistic about the time/effort expended on your bid, and if a bid was done quickly, as a trial run or is simply not that good, acknowledge this.

> *"You need to decide where to put your resources – into a new application or chasing feedback and trying to correct mistakes".*

Consider corresponding with your refusing grant maker in the form of a letter in acknowledgement of the news, conveying thanks for the consideration that your application received.  Use it as a means of maintaining possible future dialogue; conversely, to paraphrase one respondent, "*don't ring up anyone and shout*".

> *"There's no harm in writing to say 'thanks for considering us' when you get the refusal letter, unless it's the blunt 'don't even write to us' stuff.  We think that some trusts will remember and it does at least show we recognise that they're having to make hard decisions in giving and refusing grants".*

Designate a time-limited session as an opportunity to reflect and move on; use this to encourage colleagues to be as open as possible about any anxiety this refusal may have provoked about future bids.  This includes considering the balance of your priorities regarding gaining further feedback or in following through new funding leads.

If you are able to use an external consultant or reviewer to assess your situation, post-refusal, make sure that this is a pro-active role and not simply as an absorber of disappointment.

## 1. Pre-application processes and opportunities

*"We send out details of our schemes by post of how organisations do or don't fit in, and that is it".*

Assess your pre-application policy in the light of your overall grant making strategy and resources.  This could include consideration of the following issues.

**Attracting the right applicants and applications**: Consider the extent of the match between what is available, in terms of pre-application information and contact, measured against the programme aims and type of organisation you are hoping to attract (e.g. smaller, new or first-time funding organisations; organisations likely to be new to collaborative working).

**Review your policy on support at all stages of the process**: The quality of pre- and post-application support will have a direct relationship to the quality of both the applicants that are attracted to a programme and the applications that are made. Examine the implications of opting for either extreme on the continuum of pre-application support and post-application feedback.  At the extremes, this might mean either front-loading your help at the pre-application stage, to help all applicants make the best case that they can, at which point your support ends or else back-loading the support to engage in detailed help through feedback, after the application process. Identify your position on that continuum, as seen by trustees, staff and volunteers.

If you have the resources, you may be able to offer support across your grantmaking programmes at both stages.  Alternatively, it may be appropriate to modify your policy for individual programmes, depending on the particular profile of applicants you are seeking to attract.

**Whatever your policy, make sure that it is known and clear to staff, trustees and volunteers.**

*"The crux of what is involved in making these decisions is equity".*

Where you use a **Frequently Asked Questions** (FAQs) system, review, test and refresh the content regularly. Visit your FAQs as if you were an applicant. This will help you to identify whether there are new key questions that are not covered, or FAQs provided that are no longer relevant.

Where an **on-line responsive Q & A** is available, or a telephone inquiry service is offered, develop an organisational practice document, or protocol, which will help guide your responders by making clear at the outset what kinds of questions they can take.

> *"We do give some advice over the phone before a proposal is made, but we are now looking at a Q and A approach, because giving advice can get a bit tricky and they can get you into almost writing their bid for them".*

Any such protocol should include the recognition that grant seekers may put staff under pressure to give very detailed support (e.g. a preliminary view of an application or an application 'tutorial'), and if this level of assistance is not available, offer an explanation of why that is so (e.g. staff resources and time, equity between applicants).

Where a **telephone pre-application inquiry service** is offered, consider a time-limited (e.g. 2 week) window to help concentrate staff activity and save resources as well as encouraging applicants to take action.

Where you are unable to provide telephone contact or advice, inquirers can be directed to your **website or annual report**. The inclusion there of some detailed examples of past grants and the kinds of organisations supported by your grant making activities could be very helpful.

> *" 'Go and look at the website and the criteria' is sometimes off-putting, since you miss the human contact".*

Review, too, what kinds of **supplementary information** you might be able to give to inquirers or all applicants; for example, the likely number or range of grants you are expecting to be able to make from a particular programme, or, more bluntly, the most recent percentage success rate of applicants.

## 2. Two stage application procedure, linked to refusal

Where you offer a two stage application procedure, as a filter process, you may consider also providing stage one applicants with the stage two application requirements, so that they understand the expectations being placed on them throughout the process.

Two stage application processes are often looked on favourably by grant seekers since they feel that this makes it possible to find out at an early stage, before a great deal of time and energy has been expended, whether or not a proposal has any likelihood of being successful.

## 3. Communicating the refusal of a grant application

> *"Around those borderline decisions, where there has been no mechanistic rejection, one is reminded that grant making is an art and not a science".*

There are a variety of grant refusal '*no*'s', ranging from the straight '*no*' (the *NoNo*), where nothing more is said or even communicated, to the positive and pro-active 'no' (the *ProNo*), where encouragement is nevertheless given and further contact urged. Whichever model you use as a grant maker, try to ensure that all applicants are fully aware of *what kind* of response they will receive from you in the event that their application is turned down and the likely *timescale* in which grant making decisions will be made and communicated.

> *"Is what is needed is a response that matches the effort that has been put in the first place –that is, a crafted application gets a crafted answer and vice versa?"*

If at all possible, avoid the non-action approach of simply giving no response at all. Depending on your organisation style and practice and your own resources, there are various options. You may be able to provide individual notification by Email or you may prefer written communications and consider asking applicants to include a 'SAE' for a formal notification. Alternatively, you could undertake to make available a list of funded organisations by a certain date, for example, sent by email or posted on your website.

If your preferred model is to offer no further response, then ensure that applicants are clear that they will not hear from you if they are unsuccessful, explaining why (the resources in relation to application numbers, for example) and the likely timescale by which the decisions will be taken.

The means of any refusal communication will vary according to preference and resources.   However, bear in mind that many grant seekers do value this communication from a named individual within the grant making body, whether or not any further contact is available.

> *"The aim is to leave people feeling they've gained something from the experience of making an application".*

Thanking applicants for the work and effort which has gone in to their application is a courtesy that is welcomed by grant seekers, regardless of the outcome.

The majority of refusals are made formally through correspondence, so that all parties have a clear record.   However, some grant seekers also put a high value on the direct human contact offered by telephone.   If you decide to follow this route, then prime grant seekers to expect your call and ensure clarity so that misunderstandings do not arise about the precise nature of the outcome.

> *"When offering feedback in a limited time period, we've never been swamped by this".*

Meeting refused grant applicants face to face is highly unusual, although this may be appropriate for particular programmes where applicant numbers are small and further opportunities for funding are likely to arise fairly soon, or where grant seekers have been invited to apply.   If this approach is being considered, it could first be offered experimentally to selected grant seekers.

## 4.  Feedback on the refused application

This was a continuing concern for grant seekers, in relation to timeliness and utility for future learning and a reported frustration for those who considered their general experience of grant makers to be inadequate.   A review of your organisation's approach to feedback to grant applicants should incorporate consideration of both those refused and those successful in grant applications.

> *"The more you ask applicants to do in their application, the more you should respond in a similar way".*

Each grant maker will define its own parameters of what factors have been important in the decision and which of these can be made available as feedback.   Whatever approach is taken, it is helpful if grant seekers are informed in advance of the type of feedback (if any) which you are able to provide and also who on the grant maker staff will be doing this.

> *"There is too much time needed for feedback, nobody really benefits; we don't recommend other grant givers: we try to be clear to save everyone time".*

Giving feedback is a very hard thing to do; it continually tests the boundaries between grant making decisions as art and as science, and may be as emotionally testing for grant makers, staff or volunteers, as for grant seekers. An internal policy–based review of refusal practice, for example, could usefully include discovering the experiences of a range of staff right the way through to the chief executive and provide a basis for informal problem sharing among colleagues. It could also examine staff as well as trustee perspectives in those situations where staff recommendations or support for a particular application was not accepted by the decision making body.

> *"It's good to try to help people improve their application, but we can't address the needs of the whole organisation".*

In general, the attitude from grant seekers was to welcome feedback which is seen as commensurate with the level of effort which they have been required to make in their application. Although a matter of subjective judgment, it can provide a useful benchmark and is especially important where a two stage application process has been completed. It also further underlines the importance of including an expression of appreciation for the work undertaken by the grant seeker.

> *"Receiving only little feedback leads us to feel more anxious about the next application, especially since we have had a lot of success in the past. The more you're knocked back, the more anxious you become about the next application"* *(Grant seeker)*

**No Feedback**: If you are unable to provide feedback of any kind, beyond the information on refusal, include your reasons for this (notably in relation to resources) and information on your policy regarding future applications (e.g. whether you are open to new approaches, whether this funding programme is closed, whether you require that unsuccessful applicants do not re-apply within a given period).

**Standardised Feedback:** Some grant makers provide a FAQ or equivalent section on their website that may be open to applicants before they apply and gives the most common reasons for turning down an application. It may alternatively be included as a self-applying checklist in a refusal letter, with no further comment. This approach seems to have varying value and runs the risk of providing misinformation or conveying an impression of bluntness and may then trigger further queries.

**Limited Feedback**: Feedback that limits itself to informing the grant seeker that their application was good but nevertheless, could not be funded is clear about the outcome but the rationale remains opaque. If this stance is taken, at minimum it may

be useful to state the overall numbers of applicants and numbers funded, where this demonstrates the pressures facing the grant maker.

> *"In giving feedback, [there is] always the need to be careful about providing any sense of an 'ongoing dialogue' – i.e. there is no appeal from the decision nor can there be".*

Feedback which notes that the application was unable to be funded, without further detail, may also contain what appears to be a statement of regret from the grant maker ("we are very sorry that we are unable to fund etc. etc"). This approach should be considered carefully, notwithstanding that it is genuine; a non-apology approach in which specific reasons are provided offers a better insight for grant seekers.

Some grant makers operate a 'never apologise' rule although this is best operated in conjunction with an approach that recognises that grant seekers are consumers or even customers of the grant maker and need to be treated with respect.

**Ad hoc feedback**, on a case by case basis, as and when the grant seeker makes a request may be seen as timesaving and pragmatic for the grant maker. However, it may fail to save time if 'ad hoc' means entirely without guidance, in which case a pro-forma to guide feedback may need to be available. This can make the task more manageable while meeting feedback needs, especially if the grant seeker is required to take specific steps to activate this. As with inquiries on applications, a realistic time window for such inquiries may be useful.

> *"We're not able to be pro-active on every refusal, because of time. If they ask for feedback, then this is given on an ad hoc basis ".*

**Detailed Feedback**: The implicit 'gold standard' for feedback, as expressed by grant seekers, involved a combination of formal comment and informal (i.e. discussion based) comment, which was tailored, retrospectively, to the application and gave forward-looking future-based advice. Grant makers will make their own decisions on the extent to which this is feasible and desirable in their own grant-making contexts.

- Where **useful formal comment** is provided, this is generally reported as being those instances where the grant maker focuses on the extent of fit with the grant programme; their understanding of the activities which are being proposed; their approach to measuring progress against targets; and their assessment of the proposed budget.

- The possibility of grant makers' posting **a scoring system** in advance and then applying it in detail was raised by some grant seekers: this may be appropriate for use within the grant making body but not necessarily shared in specific detail as part of the refusal process.

- Giving **one-to-one help** to refused organisations on their application content and overall style will be costly.  If this is done at all, then grant makers may wish to prioritise (for any given programme) a very small number of refused applicants only, where these are seen as potential future applicants and/or working in areas where the grant maker especially wishes to develop.

- It is recognised that such **selectivity may be seen as inequitable** for applicants not so helped; but it provides a valuable insight for grant makers as well as being able to demonstrate more clearly what the resource demands and organisational realities of giving 'tailored feedback' really are.  It also offers opportunities for the grant makers to learn more about the practicalities and impact of the particular grant making programmes which they offer.

- Where feedback beyond the **minimum or non tailored variety** is offered, it is helpful for grant makers to keep a record of both the content and the nature (e.g. formal, informal, and personalised) of the feedback given and the organisation concerned. This will help track the possible value of feedback in 'refused' organisations subsequently making successful bids; although it cannot be a perfect guide.

- There may be **variations in feedback** given to organisations which are well known (and possibly previous grant recipients) and to those who have never approached the grant maker before.  Grant makers should usefully consider whether, and why, there might be any variation in the nature and form of feedback given in these two situations: from equity and support perspectives and especially if they consider they might face criticism regarding treating "insiders" differently.

It is paradoxical that as grant makers respond in more depth to requests for tailored feedback, which is forthright and to the point (which grants seekers emphasise they want), giving feedback itself becomes increasingly hard.

> *"What is a challenge for us in giving any sort of useful feedback is cases of larger and joint bids (i.e. several organisations bidding together) – how is that learning disentangled for all the organisations".*

"Saying no nicely" is not to be derided as part of a general policy of civility among organisations but it is increasingly insufficient when grant makers themselves are

challenged to find the very best possible recipients of their funding investments. Some organisations may not as yet have made the applicant-funding breakthrough. However supportive the feedback, grant makers must be able to give bad news succinctly, and in as speedy a fashion as possible, commensurate with their own operations. Each grant maker will be keeping under review how far they can change, adapt or sustain their existing communications approach on refusal; and especially how forthright they wish to and can be.

Keeping records, internally, of the reason(s) why the application was refused and the level of assessment given to the application, whether or not these are shared with applicants, is also helpful.

It supports a swift response, if appropriate, in the very unlikely event that a refused applicant makes public their disappointment towards, or criticism of, the grant maker. In such a situation, grant makers' general responsibilities for safeguarding their own staff (for example field officers or grant assessors) as well as trustees will also apply.

> *"We never get the breathing space to step back and say "what did all parties learn from assessing and being assessed in a particular round of grants bids?"*

Whatever levels are available, by offering feedback, grant makers will be increasing the intelligence and knowledge in the voluntary and community sector about the profile of a successful applicant organisation.

Whilst sharing specific feedback to applicants would not be desirable, grant makers may consider hosting 'open events' around their programmes which would make it possible to offer some generalised feedback and insights regarding unsuccessful as well as successful bids. This would also offer opportunities to develop appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of applications that have been received, in a way in which specific feedback would not.

## 5. Supportive practice beyond feedback

Grant makers will vary in their willingness to pursue the course of suggesting other potential funders who may be able to help or who may be more appropriate to the applicants' needs. Though this signposting is sometimes valued by grant seekers, it is important that the grant maker has up to date intelligence about the areas of funding by other grant makers which, though the practice would be valued by grant seekers, has resource implications. It is important that the grant maker also makes clear that the signposting represents a *suggestion* and not an implicit undertaking that 'this organisation will help'.

> *"There is some danger of being sent off in the wrong direction to other trusts. To give that sort of advice, they really need to know the sector and so what help they can offer, depends on their own knowledge".*
> *(Grant seeker)*

Another potentially supportive practice is to indicate the need for organisational help or wider capacity building in some form.

Some applications are refused from the standpoint of the perceived wider organisational needs and/or their ability suitability of the grant seeker to handle the resources they are requesting. In these cases, grant makers will often have very little, if any, capacity to tackle these problems.

However, if grant makers are minded to suggest that the refused organisation should seek some sort of support or an organisational review then they would need to be clear that any suggested sources of assistance are in fact able to offer this support.

Another option is to incorporate capacity building into the grant relationship.

## 6. Keeping contact with previous applicants

Grant makers will vary in their policy in relation to refused applicants, primarily as a function of limited resources. It is helpful to tell grant seekers what the policy is and how it operates, if at all.

> *"We haven't looked at this at all; I think we would only do it formally if there was any sign that the quality of the applications which we do fund was becoming poor".*

Where grant makers are able to do this, even at a minimum level (e.g. alerting or sending the annual report), it is valued by grant seekers. At best they are understood to regard their grant making actions and choices as informed by a continuing dialogue between them and the organisations in their field (often the 'experts', the initiators, the experimenters) rather than by an exclusively top down grant making model.

Finally, any wider communications and strategy audit by grant makers could be strengthened by seeking contact and feedback from those organisations which they have not been able to fund.

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

| GRANT SEEKERS' INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS; THEMATIC FINDINGS | GRANT MAKERS' INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS; THEMATIC FINDINGS |
|---|---|
| ▪ High value given to "preliminary contact "; also seen as part of the wider dialogue on grant makers' and grant seekers' respective roles, and of cross-sectoral networking.<br><br>▪ Marked variations in experiences of the nature and forms of decision-giving, from warm to cold, from standardised to personalised, from fast to slow or absent.<br><br>▪ A widespread and continuing search for timely, tailored and crafted feedback from grant makers on the refusal rationale; largely absent or thin but where present, welcomed as part of a professional approach.<br><br>▪ Recognition of the often severe negative emotional impacts of grant refusal, their effects on further applications and on intra- sectoral relations; whilst at the same time, not providing pretexts for organisations to "throw fits".<br><br>▪ Uncertainty on the value of increased openness not only 'who got what', but 'who did not receive', together with general opposition to going too public (or public at all) on grant refusal. | ▪ Recognition of a considerable range of communications approaches, highly tailored to the needs and operating rationales of the particular grant maker, from early open conversations to complex two stage application models, all affecting refusal stage as well as form.<br><br>▪ The equivalent differentiation of communication at refusal, a function of availability of people and other resources, board roles and of concern about being misunderstood, with subsequent pro-active contact largely unlikely.<br><br>▪ Uncertainty as to the range of organisational responses to refusal from grant seekers, reporting general civility in exchanges and negligible adverse external coverage, linked to perceived fairness in their process.<br><br>▪ Lack of agreement about the grant makers' role in organisational learning for grant seekers, with offers of clarity more prominent than specified learning support.<br><br>▪ Identification of a range of promising or helpful practices in refusal communications, whilst no commitment to a "model approach". |

| INTERMEDIARIES, SUPPORTING GRANT SEEKERS' INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS; THEMATIC FINDINGS: Majority findings | INTERMEDIARIES, SUPPORTING GRANT SEEKERS' INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS; THEMATIC FINDINGS: Minority findings |
|---|---|
| ▪ Recognition of the 'no win' situations faced by many grant makers, noting the existence of poor quality proposals and the difficulties of who takes responsibility for these. | ▪ Grant seekers' concerns that grant makers would share the news of their failure with others, and/or that news of their failure would be leaked. |
| ▪ The variety of attitudes among grant seekers towards getting and acting on feedback, with some uncertainty about learning posed through the very varying organisational timescales. | ▪ Grant seeker learning marked in some organisations by rapid adjustment of subsequent bids in the pipeline. |
| ▪ The often unrecognised challenges of internal communications for grant seekers, when telling colleagues and volunteers about their lack of grant success, including morale questions, fundraisers' shielding of organisational colleagues or a signal for wider organisation decisions. | ▪ Lack of willingness among some grant seekers to fully accept their highly competitive environments.<br><br>▪ The implications for grant seekers in applying to grant makers where funding interests were very wide and general, rather than clearly tailored to their work. |
| ▪ The undoubted negative emotional responses that grant refusal may provoke, emphasising senses of surprise rather than entitlement. | |
| ▪ The effects of organisational sub-cultures and issues of managerial styles (for CEOs) - a 'personal style puzzle' - in grant seekers' responses. | |

| FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS: GRANT SEEKERS ( Group I) | FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS: GRANT MAKERS (Group I) |
|---|---|
| ▪ The significance of, and some difficulties associated with, preliminary contact with grant makers.<br><br>▪ The importance of applications being taken seriously (visits, establishing relationships).<br><br>▪ Concern about the quality of the 'saying no' and the quality of feedback.<br><br>▪ Identification of the kinds of learning that would be sought from improved feedback.<br><br>▪ Challenges of handling the refusal at personal and organizational levels through a sense of detachment and understanding of context. | ▪ Awareness of the current economic constraints putting donors, as well as those seeking funds, under scrutiny.<br><br>▪ Challenges in refusal when former closeness between grant maker and grant seeker is tested.<br><br>▪ Supporting credibility of mixture of communication models for saying "no", in the context of the application process.<br><br>▪ The importance of presenting coherent reasons for refusal, linking to the dilemmas posed by the nature and degree of 'feedback'.<br><br>▪ Acknowledging the reputational risks issue around refusal, notwithstanding the private nature of grant making decision making. |
| FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS: GRANT SEEKERS (Group II) | FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS: GRANT MAKERS (Group II) |
| ▪ Barriers existing in gaining preliminary contact with grant makers, creating sense of insider and outsider organisations.<br><br>▪ A variety of experiences around what represented 'helpful' contact and what might and should be available. | ▪ A variable response to economic pressures, generally moving to retain giving levels where feasible, whilst inquiries (though not so much applications) rose, some of them "in desperation". |

| | |
|---|---|
| ▪ A uniform experience of a minimal information refusal and extensive critique of the limited or negligible feedback received. | ▪ Seeing "saying no" as part of the application process. |
| ▪ Looking for grant seekers in a particular field to "drive the agenda" on funding priorities, based on their own knowledge and experience. | ▪ Differing rationales for refusals leaving the 'saying no' system itself largely unaffected. |
| ▪ Differential experiences of grant makers' wider post-refusal help; seeking more rounded and sectorally knowledgeable support. | ▪ Recognition that grant seekers need to feel they have gained from applying but uncertain as to how far this can be delivered. |
| ▪ Clear preferences around information needs and feedback support that was in effect "capacity building" among grant seekers. | ▪ Very variable policy on retaining contact with refused grant seekers. |
| ▪ Shared mainly negative emotional and organizational responses to grant refusal. | ▪ Some recognition of and policy/practices for coping with reputational risk arising from grant refusal. |

# WE CAN HELP YOU FIT THE PIECES TOGETHER

*Because we're a charity too,
we understand that for fundraisers
it's essential to make a clear, strategic case
for support that demonstrates value for money and impact.*

*And as experienced grantmakers, we also know how important the Art of Refusal is.*

*Whatever your key objectives, our consultants can help maximise funding and income generation capabilities and help foundations administer grants effectively.*

*Call us on **03000 123 334** to find out how we can help you complete the picture.*

**www.cafonline.org/consultancy**

**03000 123 334**

*Registered charity number 268369*

**CAF** **Charities Aid Foundation**