



## LEARNING FROM FUNDERS

### NO. 5: ONLINE APPLICATIONS

Thursday, 6 October 2011, hosted by Buzzacott LLP

The mix of funders taking part proved this to be a highly topical discussion. Stephen Hart, Head of Grantmaking Services at Buzzacott LLP, was in the chair and guessed the impetus for greater use of ICT in managing applications is caused by reduced resources for most funders and their search for ways of cutting costs while managing an increased volume of applications.

Participants were from a great mix of situations from community-based grantmaking to national programmes, small grants to big capital funding. Discussion tried to reflect this variety and also different levels of use of ICT from the whole application process to just parts of it. The group heard initially from a panel of funders, all at different stages in the online process. Many use GIFTS software but some have bespoke systems.

First below is some scene-setting from the start of the meeting, and then notes of some of the more detailed discussion (giving comments from specific funders where appropriate).

**BBC Children in Need:** moving online has revolutionised the grants process for all involved. Applications are submitted online, and details transferred automatically to a database for a central team to do a first assessment of eligibility and flag up specific queries. Freelance assessors work online too, submitting reports for informing committee members' own online recommendations, which are then reviewed by regional staff. Development started five years ago and the system has been fully functioning for 18 months, using GIFTS and Reviewer Connect software. At the start there were concerns that it could exclude applicants who are less IT-literate. There were teething problems and some rethinking as the system progressed. Pilot testing helped reassure staff that even small organisations should be able to cope. At the start, signed copies of applications were requested by post – this is no longer done.

**Comic Relief:** open application programmes are online though solicited applications are not yet. They developed a bespoke system that integrates data into a new grant management system. A "traffic light" system informs applicants as to the status of their application.

**Cripplegate Foundation:** the online set-up took a couple of months to complete. Applications for large grants are online and applicants for small grants have the choice of online or paper. As Foundation grantmaking includes support to individuals and low income communities, many applicants do not have access to a computer, though a higher proportion that expected does apply online. Geraldine noted better applications from BME groups online than on paper.

**Football Foundation:** the online system was piloted first for smaller grants, before being rolled out to all grants programmes. Staff learned in the process the importance of having a well-designed form specifically thought through for online use – in discussion other funders also confirmed that it is not possible just to turn an original paper application form into an online one. The Foundation's first online forms were used in 2007 and there were five phases of testing internally and externally. Now there is only one form but applicants are directed down different pathways according to the programme or size of grant they are seeking.

**SCIE, Get Connected programme:** this is a large but short term grants programme to encourage use of IT in health and social care settings. Applicants have the option of paper applications but at least 90% of applications were received online. In the first of four rounds there was no way of predicting the level of likely applications and further rounds set more focused targets to narrow somewhat the range of eligible organisations and control numbers.

## **Discussion themes**

### **Two-stage application processes**

Most funders at this meeting have opted for an expression of interest which assesses eligibility and weeds out ineligible applicants before they have to do too much work on bids, followed by a second stage where the eligibles make a detailed bid. Rocket Science recently used expressions of interest (in the GLA's Team London small grants programme) to test the scale and nature of demand and, in effect, involve interested applicants in co-designing the final fund. Funders noted that applicants can get wise to eligibility quizzes and find ways of getting into the system anyway (Cripplegate Foundation).

Comic Relief uses different approaches in different funds. One which requires involvement by older service users tests for this in the first expression of interest. Sport for Change looks hard for genuine intentions around change and the first stage application is reviewed by three people, with the applicant only given access to the full form if all three give it a green light.

### **Guidance notes**

This is a crucial part of preparation for transferring application procedures from paper to online and most commonly involves a decision as to whether guidance notes should be separate, to be read at the beginning of the application (e.g. set up as a requirement before the form can be downloaded), or incorporated into the structure of questions. The latter has worked well for some, producing better-focused answers (e.g. SCIE). For the Football Foundation the converse has been true and removing guidance from the structure of the questions and placing them in a separate guidance notes document has produced better focused answers. Funders need to consider whether they decide to follow-up those applicants who start applications but do not complete them.

### **Preparation time and user testing**

All agree that time taken in user testing is invaluable, including testing the application form on a mix of groups. Most information is qualitative so drop-down lists have limited use (Cripplegate). Some have found surveys of applicants productive (Comic Relief found positive results from this) and some software packages (e.g. GIFTS) have facilities for user feedback. Rocket Science's Bid Assessment Tool has been refined with each new grants programme.

### **Problems (and some solutions)**

- Small groups do tend to have more problems with an online system, and changing the system can cause panic. Some grants processes are not online due to the sheer size-capacity of database/number of estimated applications for particular programmes (Jack Petchey).
- Need to be aware of the level of skills of people filling out application forms: SCIE had many applicants unused to seeking external funding and needed to check for inadvertent errors and do quite a bit of handholding. In the first round of grants there was a big drop-out rate of organisations not completing forms. Improvements to the form in later rounds eliminated a lot of these problems. Comic Relief changed their deadline from midnight to noon so that there would be staff to offer assistance to a group in finalising the form.
- At pilot stage, test on different types of computer and different software – e.g. ask staff to try it at home or in an internet café, to make sure it is robust (Football Foundation). Keep “sandpit time” for trouble-shooting between pilot-testing and going live.
- Some applicants find difficulties with supporting documents. Children in Need ask for all documents to be uploaded (person specs, accounts, etc.) and find that groups manage. Others let applicants send documents by post or email (Football Foundation).
- For smaller funders and local authorities it may be more appropriate and proportionate to adopt a half-way house approach, i.e. asking for electronic submission of applications which can then be linked to an IT-based assessment tool/process. This has big benefits over a paper-based system, without a significant level of investment (Rocket Science).
- How to avoid applicants being dependent on the funder for support through the process? Jack Petchey Foundation has a website to show how to avoid typical problems when submitting a form. BBC Children in Need set up a help-desk function when they launched online applications, and have a video on the website on how to complete the process.

- It can be important to reassure applicants that their bid is in the system. BBC Children in Need email a reference number to applicants to confirm the application was received. Some funders allow applicants to track online where they are in the process.
- The system can bar new applications at the closing deadline. GIFTS lets a funder choose to allow an applicant to finish an application started before the deadline.
- Experience reminds that it is important to include questions to find out who has filled in the form (within applicant organisations there can be crossed wires about who has submitted an application).

### **Benefits of online applications**

- Less printing and mailing cost (most agreed with this); improved application quality; more concise applications, using word limits (Cripplegate Foundation); less staff inputting time.
- Shortens overall time from application to decision (Football Foundation).
- Applications can be linked to reporting, payments and monitoring (Comic Relief).
- Continuity easier in relating to applicant even when foundation staff change (Comic Relief).
- A single account for each applicant organisation allows easier tracking.
- Saving and sending to applicants what they have already written saves them time.
- Adaptability, once the system has been established. After a long and careful process of setting up the initial systems, the Football Foundation can now set up a new grants programme online from scratch in some three to four weeks.
- The ability to aggregate data aids learning (Rocket Science), assists in reporting back to unsuccessful applicants and provides pointers on articulating outputs and outcomes.
- Where government money is involved, much data is demanded – available online (CDF).
- Information easier to extract for media use or projects selected for visits (Comic Relief).
- For a national programme like Get Connected, online applications allow aggregate data to be manipulated to check balances of applications received against service type, applicant type, region, etc. and to do a similar comparison as grants decisions are being made.

### **How has going online changed the way decisions on grants are made?**

- Applications can be followed through into monitoring and evaluation so the funder can clearly see when milestones are not on track and let recipients know when monitoring is due. Useful for grantmakers and recipients (Buzzacott).
- Improved efficiency and speed for grant application process (Football Foundation).
- Greater consistency in decision-making (Rocket Science), though human judgment still needed (Cripplegate).

### **Equality**

With fixed guidance, more groups are able to access applications.

Assists equal distribution of funds across targeted group (CTT).

### **Consultants and in-house expertise**

Where a funder purchases GIFTS, Buzzacott trains staff to ensure they are comfortable with using the system (e.g. BBC Children in Need). Noted that the amount of Buzzacott support can vary: CDF needed speedy set up of one programme so Buzzacott did more than usual in initial customisation, though in-house staff then took over rapidly.

Cripplegate bought a ready-made system but found it essential to have in-house technical expertise at the start.

For Get Connected, SCIE contracted with Charity Technology Trust (who customised open source software). They also outsourced the first analysis of applications received.

Comic Relief and Football Foundation both developed a bespoke grants management system.

Jack Petchey Foundation is using Benefactor.

### **Costs**

Purchase and customisation of software, set-up and training time, and IT support.

Consider whether a technically able staff member needs to be added and what more training all staff need.

Staff time saved in data-inputting.

Money may be saved in printing and mailings (though funders which visit applicants, e.g.

Cripplegate Foundation or community foundations) may still have to print documents. Average cost of GIFTS about £18,000 for purchase and set up and then running costs of about 20% of that amount each year.

### Conclusion/lessons learnt

The funders in this session suggest that extensive planning and user testing both internally and externally are required in going online. The process involves thorough review of the application process in itself, and understanding how applicants look for grants. Whilst technology offers many benefits, it cannot solve all problems and a human touch is still required. Overall, the experience reflected was that with careful investment of time and money, the funders' efficiency is improved along with the efficiency of grant recipients.

### Participants

Melanie Antao	Football Foundation (presenter)
Ian Beason	Community Development Foundation
Dan Britton	Football Foundation (presenter)
Richard Cooper	CTT (presenter)
Gemma Dunbar	Jack Petchey Foundation
Melissa Felton	Big Lottery Fund
John Griffiths	Rocket Science (presenter)
Douglas Gunn	Trust for London
Martin Hall	City Bridge Trust
Stephen Hart	Buzzacott LLP (chair of this meeting)
Chris Henderson	London Borough of Hackney
Kim Hook	Buzzacott LLP
Malcolm John	London Borough of Harrow
Alexa Kellow	School for Social Entrepreneurs
Kerry Luker	BBC Children in Need (presenter)
Augusta Morton	London Borough of Brent
Sue Nyfield	Joseph Levy Foundation
Ross Oldfield	Social Care Institute for Excellence (presenter)
Mary O'Sullivan	London Borough of Enfield
Geraldine Rees	Cripplegate Foundation (presenter)
Gurdeep Sehmi	London Borough of Greenwich
Jacqueline Smith	London Borough of Brent
Tina Stiff	Trust for London
Sue Wicks	Comic Relief
Tim Wilson	City Bridge Trust
Andrew Wright	Cripplegate Foundation (presenter)

Gaynor Humphreys, Catherine McLoughlin, London Funders Secretariat

With thanks to our presenters, and to Stephen Hart, Head of Grantmaking Services, Buzzacott LLP for taking the chair and hosting this event.