PROMOTING OUR PRIORITIES AND HOW TO APPLY

Association of Charitable Foundations

LIZ FIRTH

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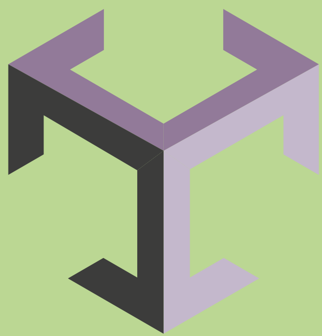


INTRODUCTION

Introduction to grant-making is a series of four publications from the Association of Charitable Foundations (ACF) designed to introduce you to the grant-making cycle.

Foundations are set up for many different reasons and to support a wide range of causes. Some are run entirely by volunteer trustees, others have one or two members of staff and some have large teams to help trustees make decisions about how to use their funding. Some work in a small local area, while others support organisations all over the UK and internationally. Clearly these differences mean foundations do things in different ways. But, in the end, our aims in grant-making are very similar – to reach and support good organisations that are making a difference to the things we care about and to do this in a way that makes the best possible use of both our time and resources and those of the organisations who approach us for help.

Based on the practical experience of ACF's diverse membership, we hope that these guidelines and ideas will be particularly helpful to brand new foundations people new to grant-making and smaller foundations with few or no paid staff.

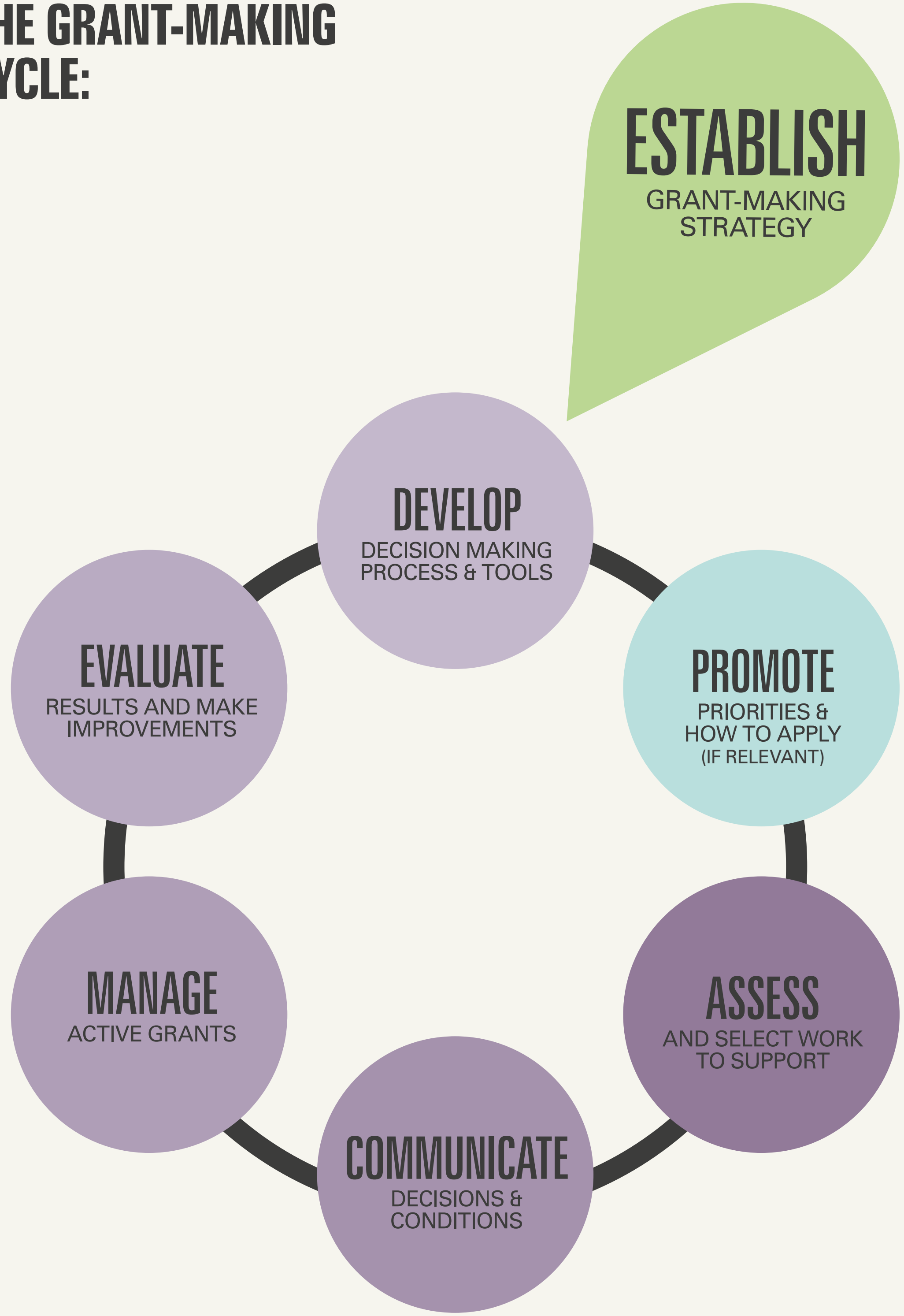
We also hope they will be of interest to any independent grant-maker thinking about the nuts and bolts of its funding practice and how this might be developed and improved. Our focus is on grant-makers who support the work of other UK-based organisations, rather than foundations focusing on individuals or who have their own operational programmes. But we hope that, whatever your own priorities or background, you will find something here that is of interest and relevance to your work.

This publication, *Promoting our priorities and how to apply*, covers one stage of the grant-making cycle, as outlined in the diagram opposite. Here we look at how to promote our foundation's programmes and priorities to potential applicants in order to encourage suitable applications – and to discourage unsuitable ones.

TERMINOLOGY

The terms trust and foundation are used interchangeably in this publication to describe charities with private, independent and sustainable income that fulfil their charitable goals mainly by funding and supporting other organisations and individuals.

THE GRANT-MAKING CYCLE:



WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

Most foundations pay close attention to the communications they produce for grant applicants and other audiences. This helps applicants to understand our objectives, grant-making processes and their chances of success. Many foundations also communicate about their existing grants and learning to inform wider practice.

There are many positive reasons for clearly setting out areas of interest, priorities, what we will not fund and the basis on which we make judgements:

- **Attracting the right applicants** – whether we want to achieve specific outcomes with our grant-making or have chosen to support good work across a range of areas of social need, guidelines enable us to actively encourage the types of application we most want to see. The easier it is for operational charities to identify a close fit with a funder, the more likely they are to make this application a priority – and the more likely we are to find great people and organisations to fund who meet our criteria.
- **Managing demand** – if potential applicants are clear about what we want to fund and the rules we will apply, they can make realistic judgements of their chances of success. This should result in fewer inappropriate applications, which waste the time of both applicants and foundations. Published guidelines give us a clear rationale for rejecting inappropriate applications quickly – giving us more time to spend on those applications that we might want to fund.
- **Being, and being seen to be, fair** – a clear public statement of how we do things gives an important message to applicants that we are striving to be informed and consistent in our grant-making decisions. We may also want to give a positive message to particularly marginalised communities, or other groups who are not well represented amongst our applications, so that they know we are keen to hear from them.
- **Creating realistic expectations** – all foundations have to go through due process in making grants but their approaches, timescales and grant-levels vary significantly. Potential applicants need to know what is involved in making an application, how long it is likely to take and what scale of grant they can reasonably expect if they are successful.

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES

As a starting point, our communications should be:

01

Accurate representations of the foundation’s strategy, priorities and processes

02

Clearly written, giving their audience all they need to know, as simply and briefly as possible

03

Explicit about the information required from applicants and the length and intensity of the process

04

Transparent about how decisions are made

05

Well-promoted so that they are easily accessible

06

Successful in attracting eligible applications – and minimising ineligible ones.

DEVELOPING GUIDELINES: THE PRACTICALITIES

Good guidelines do not need to be long or complicated. Applicants are looking for a short, clear explanation of our interests, exclusions and the types of grant we will make.

Being clear and open about the following information provides a firm basis for a good application process:

WHO WE ARE, OUR PROGRAMMES AND OUR INTERESTS

- **About us** – some brief information about the origin, purpose, nature and scale of our organisation, giving a flavour of the kind of grant-maker we are
- **Aims of the grant-making programme** – an overview of the purpose of our programme(s) and what we want them to achieve
- **Focus/priority areas** – the work we want to fund, the needs we want our grants to meet, or the communities we want to support.

WHO WE WILL FUND

- **Eligibility** – information about who we are constitutionally able to fund or causes trustees have chosen to support. Some foundations are only able to support registered charities or individuals in need, for example, or have to fund within a specified geographic area or a particular beneficiary group. And, within their constitutional powers, trustees may choose only to support organisations working on defined causes, such as the environment, the arts or criminal justice, for example. Applicants are only eligible if they are working in these fields.
- **Exclusions** – trustees are also free to set other boundaries on their funding. Common exclusions relate to certain sizes or types of organisation, types of work or types of funding and to general appeals.

OUR FUNDING

- **Types of funding given** – whether we focus on core costs, project costs, capital grants or unrestricted funding
- **Typical grants** – foundations often illustrate their guidelines with short case studies or photographs of typical grants. Where we have a broad portfolio or offer a range of grants by value, it is helpful to make this clear and give examples at different levels. And careful selection of case studies can help encourage applications from, for example, particular geographical regions or communities.

WHAT WE NEED FROM APPLICANTS

As discussed in *Developing decision making processes and tools*, the big challenge is to collect all the information we need to make good decisions without creating an unrealistic burden on applicants. Guidelines need to be very clear and explicit about our requirements.

- **What information to send** – whether we want applicants to complete an application form or whether we prefer a less formal structure. In either case, it is important to give clear instructions on the issues to be covered in an application, their relative weight and an overall word or page limit.
- **Supporting information** – what supplementary information we want to see to help assess both compliance with legal and governance requirements and good practice standards in key areas of work. Some important documents, such as annual accounts and constitutions, may be available from online sources, which cuts down on time and paperwork. If you do not need to see any supporting information with a first stage application, it is important to make this clear.
- **Expectations of successful grantees** – some guidelines give information on any conditions that will be attached to a grant or monitoring requirements.
- **Checklist** – a summary reminder of what to include and any deadlines, if appropriate.

WHAT ADVICE WE WILL GIVE

Some foundations either accept or encourage telephone calls or emails from potential applicants before they complete a full application. Although this takes time, they argue that it cuts down ineligible applications, reducing the workload for both the foundation and applicants. Some may limit their support to applicants with communication difficulties or other special needs, in order to improve access. See *Developing decision making processes and tools* for further discussion on this subject. If you will not accept any enquiries before an application is submitted, it is important to say so – and to be sure that your guidelines are extra clear.

THE BIG CHALLENGE IS TO COLLECT ALL THE INFORMATION WE NEED TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS WITHOUT CREATING AN UNREALISTIC BURDEN ON APPLICANTS

OUR DECISION MAKING PROCESS

- **Application deadlines** – if you operate grant-making cycles or any other cut-off date, these must be included. Applicants also need to know if deficiencies in the application – such as a missing piece of supporting information – will lead to immediate rejection or whether there is a 'grace period' to put this right.
- **Who decides and on what information** – a transparent description of the application process provides clarity for applicants and helps to manage expectations. They need to know, for example, whether we run a one or two stage application process, if they are likely to speak to or meet us, and when decisions are made and who makes them. See *Developing decision making processes and tools* for more on this subject. In order to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements on your foundation, it may also be necessary to tell applicants at this stage what their information will be used for and how it will be stored.
- **Timescales** – an indication of the average time it takes to deal with an application and when to expect a decision.
- **Success rates** – most foundations receive many more eligible applications than they can support, even though they may be of good quality. If it is possible to quantify the success rates at different stages of the process, this may help potential applicants make a judgement about whether to make this application a priority.

PRESENTATION AND DESIGN

The purpose of producing guidelines is to get our message across to its intended audience – so how our publications look plays a critical role. Again this need not be a complex or costly exercise.

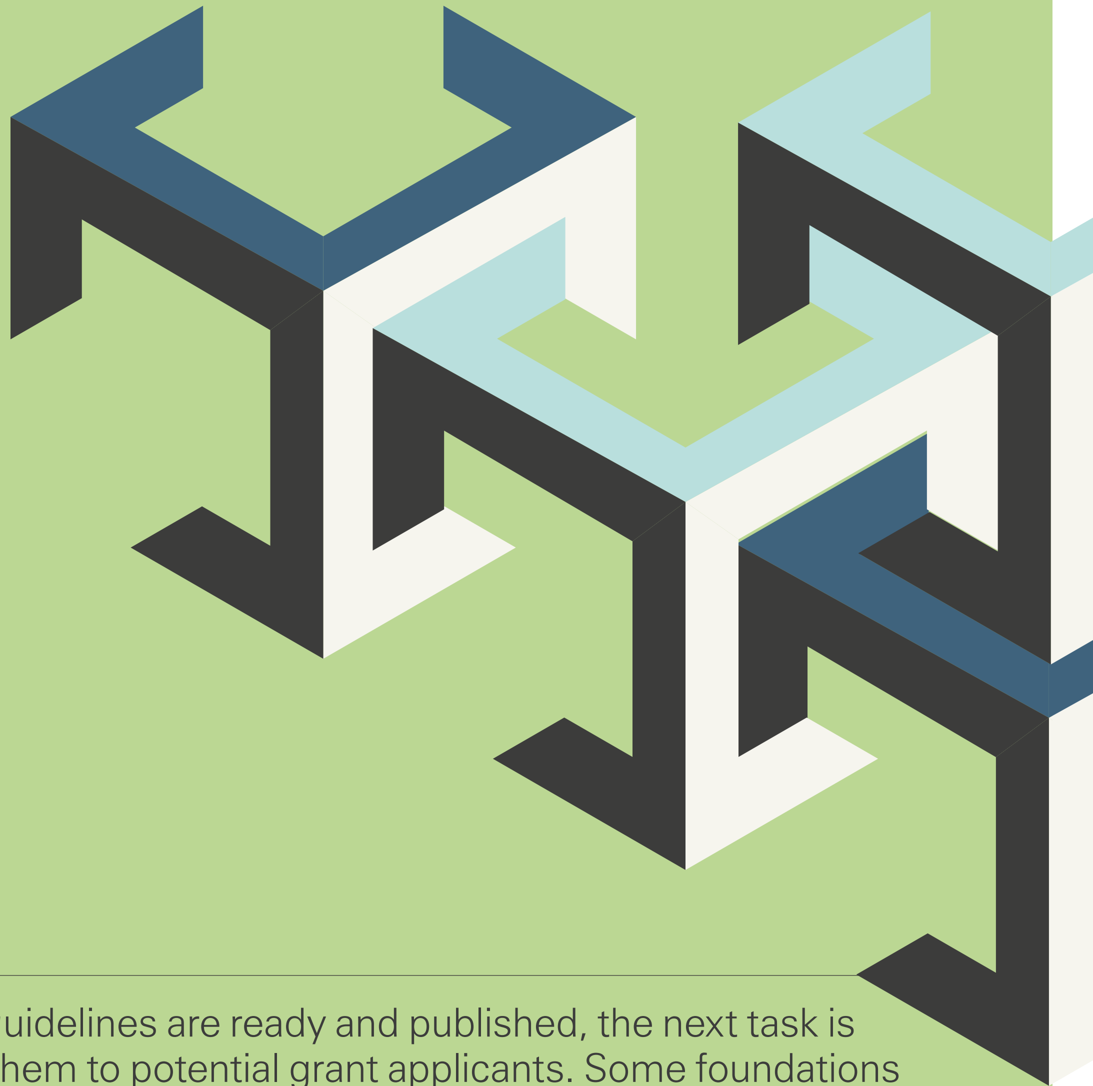
Although many foundations do use design professionals in preparing their websites and printed documents, even the simplest, 'home-produced' guidelines benefit from careful attention to make sure they are simple, clear and easy to read. Presenting ideas in a logical order, cutting out unnecessary detail or jargon and using short words and sentences along with a simple, uncluttered design all help to get the message across. Asking someone who does not know the foundation well to read and comment can make a big difference.

Having produced guidelines, foundations want to make sure that they are accessible to groups working in their areas of interest. For most, the foundation's website is the obvious place to publish guidelines and keep them up to date. Some still make printed copies available for distribution in their local area or because they are useful as a handout at promotional and public events. Applicants do often want to print out copies of guidelines to refer to while they are completing their application, so it helps if a well-designed version for printing is available, even if the foundation only publishes electronically.

Some foundations put video or audio clips on their websites, explaining their guidelines and priorities. Technology is making it easier to provide information in other formats so that they are accessible to people with disabilities. Disability charities are a good source of advice on the best approaches – and some provide services converting information into appropriate formats.

Although only statutory bodies are required to do so by law, foundations funding in Wales may want to consider producing their guidelines in both Welsh and English. International funders, even if they only work through UK registered charities, sometimes make guidelines available in other languages – again using either written documents or video and audio. There has been much discussion over the years in the UK about how best to reach minority communities with a significant number of members who do not speak English as a first language. It remains rare for grant-makers to produce full guidelines in community languages, but some have developed promotional materials to show their interest in attracting and funding these groups, even though applications must usually be made in English.

PUBLICATION AND PROMOTION



Once guidelines are ready and published, the next task is to get them to potential grant applicants. Some foundations are well-known to potential beneficiaries, so applicants will be actively looking for information about their priorities.

Others may need to do more to get their messages out. And all grant-makers may want to take a more proactive approach if, for example, they have made big changes in the way they work or are not attracting good quality applications from some of the communities or areas of need that they are keen to reach.

Again we can choose how active to be in this area, either just making sure information is easy to find if people are looking for it or taking steps to promote it more widely.

MAKING INFORMATION AVAILABLE

- **Promoting our website** – some foundations take active steps to improve their website's ranking in internet searches, so that their name appears in connection with key areas of interest. We may also want to consider setting up links to and from other organisations' websites. The charity regulators in all four UK nations include links to websites within their register of charities. Many foundations also have social media accounts, either for active promotion or simply as another route to their website.
- **Grant-seeker directories** – there are a range of online grant search services and printed directories for charities, community groups and other third sector organisations. Often these will include information about foundations from published sources. So it is worth making sure the foundation's details are included and checking regularly to keep them up to date.

ACTIVE PROMOTION

- **Direct promotion** – many grant-makers have good contact management systems or mailing lists of their own. It is usually straightforward to email past contacts and relevant networks to let them know about new programmes or guidelines, though it is essential to comply with current data protection regulation if doing so. Some use social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter as well – although this does need active management if it is to be effective in reaching audiences.
- **Working through networks** – relevant umbrella organisations are usually happy to feature grant programmes in their regular newsletter to members. Local voluntary sector support organisations, such as Councils for Voluntary Service and other third sector support groups are also useful contacts, particularly if we want to reach a specific geographical location. Providing fundraising information to local groups is a big part of their work and they usually have good local mailing lists, run seminars and produce regular newsletters. Most of this kind of promotion is done electronically but flyers or other written information may still be useful for some audiences or in some circumstances.
- **Surgeries and 'funders' fairs'** – foundations are often asked to give talks about their funding at local, regional or national events. This can be a good way to publicise our interests and demonstrate our funding commitments and priorities. Some larger foundations set up events of their own to provide more in depth advice on their own priorities and approach.
- **Using 'traditional' media** – third sector trade papers are always on the lookout for news items about new programmes or a change in a foundation's focus and may be interested in carrying a bigger story. Specialist newspapers and magazines (on or offline) in our areas of priority may be keen to interview the foundation or write up programmes. An interview or even a short mention on a local radio station – or one with a specific target audience, such as a particular minority community – can be a good way of reaching a wide range of people, especially those who are not linked into conventional charity networks.

PRESENTING IDEAS IN A LOGICAL ORDER, CUTTING OUT UNNECESSARY DETAIL OR JARGON AND USING A SIMPLE, UNCLUTTERED DESIGN ALL HELP TO GET THE MESSAGE ACROSS.

MONITORING AND REFRESHING OUR PROMOTION

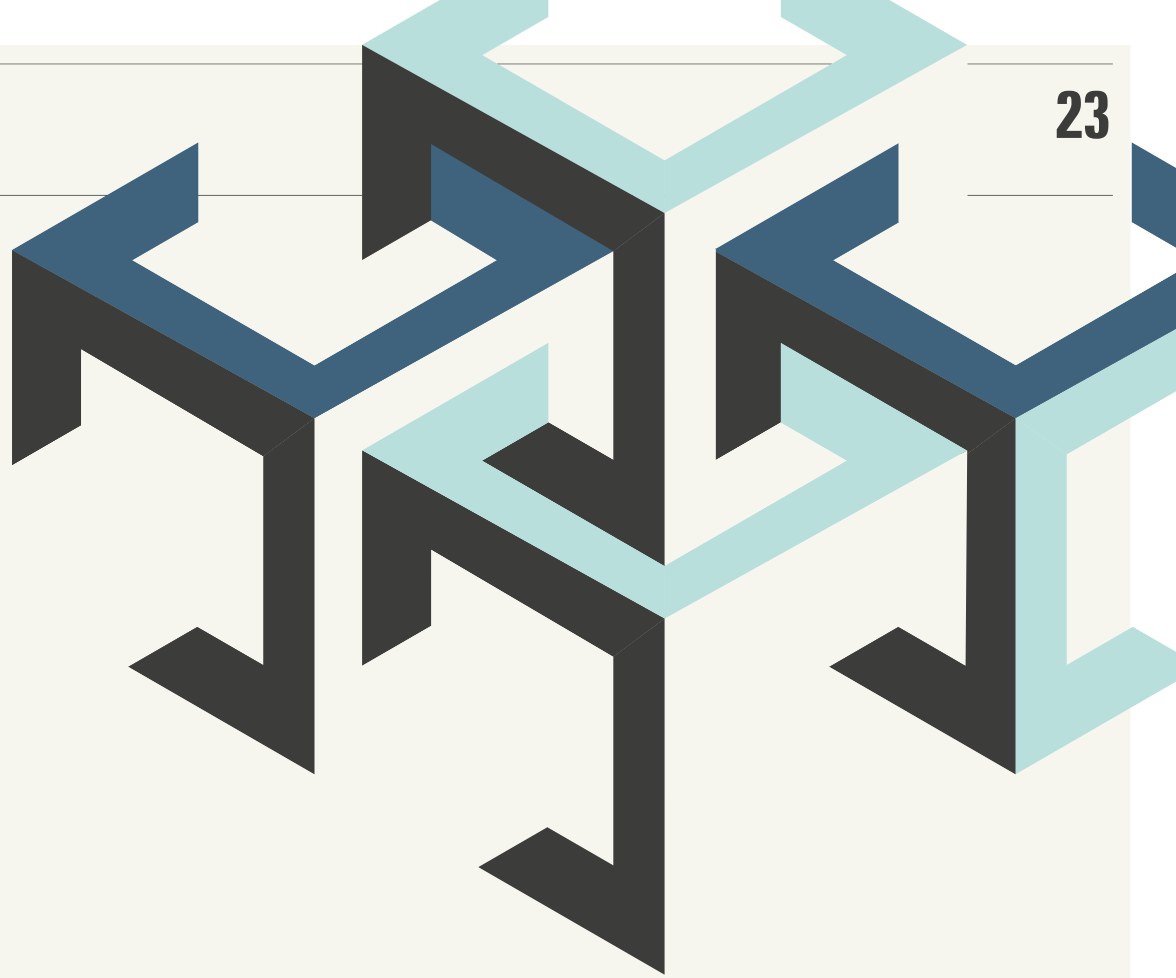
The test of good promotion is that it delivers relevant applications that meet our programme priorities and, as far as possible, deters those who are not eligible or are excluded by our funding criteria.

Some ways to monitor the reach and success of the various elements include:

- Regularly reviewing the number and type of applications received, including how many were eligible, the type of work and target group, and geographical location. This will indicate how well people understand and are using our guidelines, and which groups we are reaching or failing to reach.
- Asking applicants how they found out about the programme – and looking for any patterns in successful applications or where particular types of applicant heard about us.
- Reviewing website statistics, such as the number of visits and unique visitors and how often our guidelines and application information are downloaded.

In light of these results, we can then take active steps – for example through news or messages on our website or by targeted promotion – to clarify our guidance to grant applicants and encourage or discourage particular kinds of applications.

“THE TEST OF GOOD PROMOTION IS THAT IT DELIVERS INTERESTING AND RELEVANT APPLICATIONS THAT MEET OUR PROGRAMME PRIORITIES AND, AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, DETERS THOSE WHO ARE NOT ELIGIBLE OR ARE EXCLUDED BY OUR FUNDING CRITERIA.”



ACF is grateful to Liz Firth for writing this publication and to the many trusts and foundations she consulted for their advice and expertise.

With more than 25 years in the charity sector, Liz has long experience as both an applicant and a grant-maker, including as Grants Director for a large national and international grant-maker. As an independent consultant, she works with a wide range of funders – including endowed, fundraising and spend-out foundations, corporate and family trusts, reactive and proactive donors – as well as with the operational charities they support.

Liz has produced numerous resources for ACF members over the years including publications on greener grant-making, endowment management and lessons from spending out.

This series would not have been possible without the generous support of The Santander Foundation.

ACF is the membership body for UK foundations and grant-making charities. Driven by a belief that foundations are a vital source for social good, our mission is to support them to be ambitious and effective in the way that they use their resources. We do this through the provision of policy and advocacy, research and information, and a wide-ranging programme of events and learning. Our 330 members collectively hold assets of around £50bn and give over £2.5bn annually.

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