

# BECOMING STRONGER FOUNDATIONS



**Examples of ambitious and effective practice  
from the first year of the Stronger Foundations  
self-assessment tool**

March 2022



# INTRODUCTION

Many ACF members told us that the pandemic offered a stark reminder of why being a stronger foundation is so important. Perhaps more than ever, foundations are seeking to ensure that all their resources achieve as much impact as possible for the causes and communities they serve.

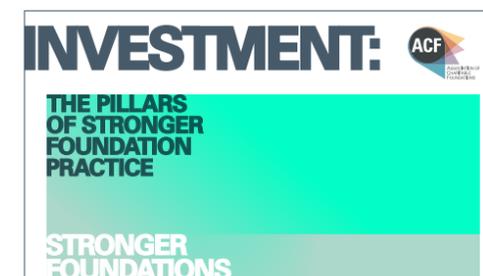
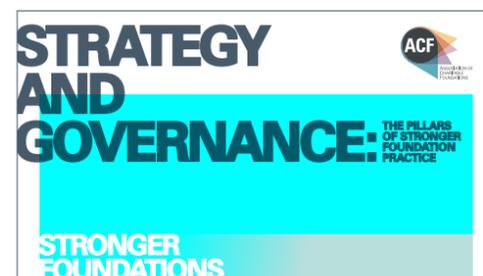
Through the Stronger Foundations initiative, ACF members set themselves a high bar to pursue ambitious and effective practice across all areas of their work. Just before the pandemic began, six member-led working groups involving 100 foundation representatives had explored a variety of thematic areas below:

This evidence-gathering inquiry resulted in the creation of 40 ‘pillars of stronger foundation practice’.

Over the last year, more than 50 ACF members completed a total of 110 **self-assessment tool** surveys to score their own performance against these pillars. They also described their current practice and their plans to go further. When using the tool, each agreed to share their anonymised results more widely to give a better understanding of where foundations are strongest and where they have further to travel.

This report summarises data gathered through the tool over a 14-month period, from when it was launched in December 2020 through to February 2022. It finds that amid a pandemic that put unprecedented demand on their people and resources, foundations across the UK – from the very largest and most well-resourced, to those that are small and volunteer-run – continued to improve their practice and achieve even greater impact.

**This report celebrates these efforts and aims to inspire all ACF members to find ways to become stronger foundations in the years ahead.**



# KEY FINDINGS

Since its launch in December 2020, more than 50 ACF members completed a total of 110 **self-assessment tool** surveys to score their own performance against pillars of stronger foundation practice. The pillars were developed by ACF members through the Stronger Foundations initiative.

Amid a pandemic that put unprecedented demand on their people and resources, foundations continued to improve their practice and achieve even greater impact. This report finds that foundations generally feel they are more advanced on funding practices and transparency and engagement, but feel they have furthest to travel on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

We hope that this report will inspire all foundations to pursue the pillars of stronger foundation practice. It contains a selection of examples of ambitious and effective practice that foundations reported in their self-assessment surveys, organised by thematic area.

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Foundations are reviewing disparities in funding towards Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) led organisations and embedding DEI in their grant-making strategies. Others are making board diversity a priority, committing to the Living Wage, encouraging anonymous feedback from grantees, or publicly speaking about key issues affecting civil society and underrepresented groups.

## STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE

Foundations are introducing fixed trustee terms, skills audits and targets for improving board diversity. Others are conducting governance reviews, considering time horizons, and making effort to collaborate with other organisations.

## IMPACT AND LEARNING

Foundations are undertaking strategy review processes which include people with lived experience and former grantees. Others are prioritising informal learning across the organisation, making sure to use different tools in the funder toolbox, acknowledging failure and taking risks.

## TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT

Foundations are ensuring their information is accessible in different languages and publishing data on 360giving. Others are giving detailed feedback, being open about decision-making processes, giving clear guidance, and maintaining relationships.

## INVESTMENTS

Foundations are encouraging all trustees to input on decisions about investments and providing regular investment training. Others are publicly publishing details about their investments, listening to grantees concerns and priorities, and considering their time horizons.

## FUNDING PRACTICES

Foundations are working in partnership with grantees, encouraging open conversation and staying in touch with changing needs, concerns and challenges of grant-holders. Others are offering capacity building and professional development support, and providing unrestricted, responsive and flexible funding where possible.

# EXAMPLES OF AMBITIOUS AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

## METHODOLOGY

Trustees and staff from all kinds and sizes of foundation told us that they used the self-assessment tool in a variety of contexts, such as board meetings, away days and strategic reviews. The benefits of the tool were [summarised in an initial ACF report](#) in 2021, with one foundation director stating:

“Undertaking the Stronger Foundations self-assessment has been incredibly helpful for our Foundation and really helped us to shape our strategic and operational priorities. For a small outlay of time, the self-assessments are a tool that we can return to time and again, and they are really helping us to keep track of the progress we are making.”

**Foundation director**

As well as supporting individual foundations, the self-assessment tool offers an extraordinary insight into sector-wide practices. This allows a detailed exploration of the practice described by them in relation to each pillar. The data can also be filtered by size and type of foundation, enabling a more nuanced understanding.

In the thematic sections that follow is a selection of examples of ambitious and effective practice that foundations reported in their self-assessment surveys. It is worth noting that:

- ▶ The examples chosen are those that we think represent an ambitious implementation of a pillar
- ▶ More than half of the examples are from smaller foundations awarding less than £1m in grants a year (and are the majority of both UK grant-making charities and ACF members)

- ▶ The examples are not intended to be representative of all responses received, but are selected highlights
- ▶ No type of foundation has a monopoly on ambitious practice
- ▶ All foundations reported areas where they had a significant distance to travel
- ▶ All foundations reported at least one area where they felt they were at an advanced stage

Details about a foundation’s size and type are given alongside the examples (small = up to £1m grant-spending a year; medium £1m–£5m; large £5m+). The appendix to this report summarises the average scores awarded by foundations in relation to their own practice, which gives helpful insight into where foundations generally think they are more advanced (funding practices; transparency and engagement) and where they have further to travel (diversity, equity and inclusion).

# DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Just over two years ago when the first Stronger Foundations report was published, evidence and feedback gathered at the time suggested that issues relating to diversity, equity and inclusion were considered by some to only be relevant to a minority of foundations. This is not so today. As ACF's CEO Carol Mack has said "a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion is more than just ambitious practice – it's necessary practice for foundations".

The stark inequalities exacerbated and highlighted by Covid-19 on Black, Asian and minority ethnicity (BAME) communities, older and disabled people, and people in poverty has challenged foundation thinking and led foundations to ask some searching questions of themselves.

Campaigns from within the sector have exposed institutional racism and bias,

and catalysed many foundations to examine their own culture and commit publicly to change for the first time, including through DEI statements and policies.

Communities from within the foundation sector have been transformative in enabling staff and trustees that previously found it hard to find a platform or get support to become active and influential. Practical solutions have been provided, with foundations now being more proactive on recruitment and more intentional about the funding data they collect.

We know from our engagement with members, and from the data gathered from our Stronger Foundations self-assessment tool, that members want to make progress on DEI. They also tell us that it's the area where they have the furthest distance to travel.

**1 INVESTS TIME AND RESOURCES IN UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION**

**2 PRODUCES AND REVIEWS STRATEGIES THAT WILL IMPLEMENT DEI PRACTICES**

**3 COLLECTS, TRACKS AND PUBLISHES DEI DATA ON ITS OWN PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCE**

**4 HAS A DIVERSE TRUSTEE BOARD AND STAFF TEAM, BOTH IN TERMS OF DEMOGRAPHICS AND EXPERIENCE**

**5 REFLECTS AND IMPLEMENTS DEI PRACTICES IN ITS FUNDING ACTIVITIES**

**6 EXPRESSES ITS DEI COMMITMENT, POLICIES AND PRACTICES PUBLICLY**

**7 MAKES ITSELF ACCOUNTABLE TO THOSE IT SERVES AND SUPPORTS**

**8 USES ITS OWN POWER TO ADVOCATE FOR AND ADVANCE DEI PRACTICES**

**9 COLLABORATES WITH OTHERS TO PROMOTE AND IMPLEMENT DEI PRACTICES**



# DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

“ Last year we had several conversations about diversity at board level. We undertook a review of grants made in relation to BME beneficiaries and BME led groups and used this to identify a conscious focus on DEI in our new strategy.”  
**(medium-sized family foundation)**

“ We have given time and resource to the pillars, to include considering DEI at board meetings and within our grant-making strategy. We have a working group, which has considered most of these things, the rhetoric, training needs, what we need to do. We have begun embedding DEI in grant-making. We have thought about the lack of DEI infrastructure in our establishment and history and recognise the wider issue of the law being dominated by white, privileged people.”  
**(medium-sized national foundation)**

“ We are part of an organisation that recognises the importance of DEI work. We have a fully dedicated post within the organisation actively promoting these issues and are working to launch a new DEI strategy to enhance practice.”  
**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We have made a specific statement in our new three-year strategy to further understand and address the DEI of our grant-making.”  
**(medium family foundation)**

“ Board diversity is a much higher priority. We have policy of using recruitment to improve the diversity of the board. The board have agreed that diversity will not be allowed to reduce. We have improved board policies and have a lead trustee on diversity issues.”  
**(small international foundation)**

“ We pride ourselves on the relationship and open communication with grantees and have received anonymous feedback to validate this.”  
**(medium family foundation)**

“ We put our organisational name to initiatives that seek to encourage fairness and equity. We have limited supply chains but endeavour to procure goods and services from organisations and firms that are consistent with our values. We are committed to the Living Wage and ensure that we invest in companies with high ESG ratings.”  
**(small family foundation)**

“ We speak out about key issues affecting civil society and particularly underrepresented groups, including government policy changes, legislative developments and funding programmes that may cause harm. We provide platforms for people and communities that are less frequently listened to, and enable them to access the corridors of power.”  
**(small corporate foundation)**

In addition to these examples, some frequently mentioned examples of action included:

- ▶ Using the [Fundors for Race Equality Alliance](#) grants audit tool
- ▶ Making grants data available in alignment with the [360 Giving](#) data standard
- ▶ Diversifying family-led boards to include non-family members
- ▶ Creating a DEI statement and publishing this on the foundation’s website and in its annual report
- ▶ Undertaking research on connections between the endowment and colonialism and the slave trade
- ▶ Involvement in collaborations such as the [DEI Data Standard](#) project, [Foundations Ratings Project](#), [Just Foundations initiative](#), [ACF’s Stronger Foundations](#), the [DEI Coalition](#), [Future Foundations UK](#), the [Grant Givers Movement](#), and the [joint letter](#) from ACF members in response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

# IMPACT AND LEARNING

Foundations – unbound by political or market cycles, able to take the long view and act responsively and flexibly – are well placed to catalyse social good where it is absent and preserve it where it is under threat. They have power, not just as a result of their financial clout, but also their independence, their brand, their freedom to act, their voice and their networks.

Every foundation – regardless of its size, areas of interest, source of income, geographical location or operating model – has impact in a multitude of ways, both positive and negative: impact on grantees, on people, on places, on policy, on society, on other funders and on the environment. This has been particularly true of the choices made by foundations during the last two years. As our dedicated resource for smaller foundations set out, achieving impact is not the preserve of large foundations, and in many ways smaller foundations can be structurally advantaged to achieve impact.

A stronger foundation understands the impact it is trying to achieve, and also the impact of its actions and inactions. A foundation that doesn't intentionally consider its impact in these ways will fail to make the most of its potential, and could even cause harm to the causes, places, organisations and individuals it seeks to support.

Crucial to understanding and improving impact is enabling a learning culture. This includes understanding the needs of the causes and communities the foundation is trying to support, interrogating its own legitimacy in working in a place or on a particular issue, gathering and responding to honest feedback about its practices, sharing what it knows with others, and learning from experiment and failure. A stronger foundation understands why it does the things that it does, and is also willing to change what it does in order to improve and evolve.

- 1 UNDERSTANDS ITS MISSION AND THE IMPACT IT IS SEEKING TO ACHIEVE**
- 2 BASES ITS DECISIONS ON EVIDENCE, INCLUDING MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK AND LIVED EXPERIENCE**
- 3 BELIEVES THAT EVERYONE IN THE ORGANISATION HAS A ROLE IN THE PURSUIT OF IMPACT, AND ENABLES A CULTURE OF LEARNING**
- 4 CONSIDERS THE WHOLE TOOLBOX IN PURSUIT OF IMPACT**

- 5 PROACTIVELY SEEKS TO UNDERSTAND HOW ITS OPERATIONS AFFECT OTHERS, AND SEEKS TO AVOID AND REDRESS HARM**
- 6 LEARNS FROM FAILURE**
- 7 THINKS COLLABORATIVELY TO PURSUE IMPACT AND ADVANCE ITS LEARNING**



# IMPACT AND LEARNING

“ We use some of the tools in the toolbox! We use our grant-making to address the problems we see and to help achieve our mission. We use our endowment as a tool to advance ethical practices and promote and support sustainable and low carbon business. We could leverage our grant-making in other ways.”

**(small family foundation)**

“ Comprehensive strategy process including a theory of change, clear goals, delivery plan for each year and the involvement of former grantees, people with lived experience and staff.”

**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We take our time to form a grant agreement and often fund with others who we challenge and are challenged by.”

**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We are currently developing and implementing our mission as we review our strategy and spending – working out what it is that we want our endowment to achieve. We are radically overhauling our grant-making because continuing to make small grants in the current vital decade for the planet did not seem fit for purpose.”

**(small family foundation)**

“ Clear board level commitment to achieving impact. Impact KPIs introduced. Improved learning from evaluations. There is informal learning across the organisation after events, project completion”

**(small international foundation)**

“ Investment policy very much focussed on redressing harms. This is where we could do the most harm. Robust oversight of grant decisions at each stage meaning decisions can be constructively challenged.”

**(large independent foundation)**

“ If we see a problem or something goes wrong, we acknowledge it and work to fix it. We feel we can take risks as a foundation and understand that not everything can succeed.”

**(small family foundation)**

“ We work collaboratively wherever possible. We share our efforts, platforms and work as far as possible. We often work with and through networks.”

**(medium corporate foundation)**

# STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE

Strategy and governance are incredibly important and easy to take for granted. When governance is fit for purpose, you don't tend to notice it. When things are going well you might get away with poor governance and with a strategy that doesn't need to lead you to make the best decisions for your mission. But that is exactly when they are worth attending to, because when times are not so good, or unexpected challenges arise as they have in the last two years, that is when you really need strong governance and a strategy that makes the most of your resources.

Good governance and an effective strategy are at the heart of what makes for an ambitious and effective organisation which maximises its potential for social good. For foundations – who frequently have few of the checks and balances that come with the need to raise funds, or to deliver services – these are especially important issues.

A strong strategic and governance framework is therefore vital to clearly set out what the organisation is working towards and how decisions are made and recorded to achieve that, allowing trustees, staff and stakeholders the confidence to know that decisions serve the public benefit the charity is committed to deliver.

**1 HAS A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF ITS VISION, MISSION AND VALUES AND ARTICULATES THEM PUBLICLY**

**2 CONTINUALLY STRENGTHENS ITS GOVERNANCE, INCLUDING ITS DIVERSITY**

**3 INFORMS ITS STRATEGY WITH DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES AND A RANGE OF EVIDENCE**

**4 DESIGNS ITS STRATEGY TO MAKE THE MOST OF ALL AVAILABLE RESOURCES, AND SUPPORTS GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THOSE IT FUNDS**

**5 RECOGNISES THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF TIME**

**6 IS AWARE OF THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT AND ITS ROLE IN THE WIDER ECOSYSTEM**

**7 IS ACCOUNTABLE, OPEN TO FEEDBACK AND RESPONSIVE TO CHALLENGE**



# STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE

“ We have a five-year programme of improving governance. Fixed trustee terms have been introduced, and yearly appraisals. Skills audit are carried out, and new trustees were recruited to fill missing areas. We review the board against the Charity Governance Code annually. The board acknowledges improvements are needed in board diversity, although there is good diversity of experience and age – not enough ethnic and gender diversity. Targets for improving board diversity have been introduced.”

**(small international foundation)**

“ We follow the Charity Governance Code and review it annually. A DEI Statement is in place plus an action plan in progress.”

**(medium corporate foundation)**

“ We have made some improvements in governance in the last two years, including a governance review, recruiting of a new chair and three new committee members with lived experience. We have also improved our governance systems.”

**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We are reviewing our charity’s operations, who it serves, why, and how.”

**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We ask and explore governance as part of our assessment criteria. We are planning to do more by way of articulating an overall organisational strategy and a funder plus offer.”

**(large independent foundation)**

“ We consider time horizons for our endowment, but also on our grant-making.”

**(large local foundation)**

“ We collaborate with organisation serving the same and groups of people to ensure we support our communities and individuals across a number of areas. We will continue to consult with our beneficiaries to ensure the charity stays relevant, focused and delivering on its objects.”

**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We were very transparent when developing our strategy and invited feedback from those in sector, people with lived experience and other funders. We fully embraced the feedback received.”

**(small corporate foundation)**

# TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT

**There is a growing interest in charitable foundations – not just in what they fund, but the source of their funding, where their assets are invested, and how decisions are made.**

Foundations may lack many of the lines of accountability and public pressure that others face – such as shareholders or customers – but are not immune from these trends. Stronger foundations are increasingly intentional about the decisions that they take, how they engage with the outside world, and how they ‘tell their own story’.

Rather than seeing greater transparency and better engagement as a risk or something to resist, many foundations have found it brings clear advantages; it builds trust and legitimacy, promotes efficiency and results in more equitable access to information. It can improve decision-making, enhance impact and increase influence.

But there are also limits to transparency – and like all foundation assets and decisions, it needs to be deployed intentionally and effectively. For some, a degree of opacity will be necessary in order to deliver their charitable mission, such as those who fund in contested areas, where blanket transparency could be actively harmful, even life-threatening, for example, if you support work with LGBTIQ+ rights organisations in jurisdictions that persecute these communities.

These issues need to be considered in the individual context of the foundation, its source of income, its geography, its charitable purposes and in proportion to its size.

Interpreting and implementing transparency is not straightforward. There are nuances and ifs and buts that cannot be avoided. But what is clear is that, in nearly all cases, leaning towards more transparent and more engaged practice is likely to bring significant benefits.

**1 UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT, AND ARTICULATES ITS APPROACH**

**2 EMBEDS TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT ACROSS ALL ITS ACTIVITIES**

**3 ENABLES AN INTERNAL CULTURE OF TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT**

**4 PROACTIVELY ENGAGES EXTERNAL AUDIENCES**

**5 MAKES THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES AND INITIATIVES THAT ENABLE TRANSPARENCY**



# TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT

“ We know who our stakeholders are. We regularly consult them. We publish information about ourselves, and have considered how much makes us accessible. We publish our content in three languages.”

**(small international foundation)**

“ We publish details of our grant-making on 360Giving and are clear about the fact that we do not take applications.”

**(large family foundation)**

“ We have clear guidance in place for grant-giving, detailed feedback to applicants provided, strong review and feedback loops for partnership grant partners, and publish details of all grants.”

**(medium corporate foundation)**

“ We are open and explain our decision-making processes and the basis of our decisions (in line with our mission and strategy).”

**(small corporate foundation)**

“ There is regular engagement with board (through board meetings, sub committees, process group). The board gets a run-down of our activities and the whole team attend board meetings. A perception survey is carried out and all findings shared publicly and shared internally too.”

**(large independent foundation)**

“ We allocate a huge amount of time to building and maintaining relationships. We are honest when we feel a partnership is coming to an end and we encourage our grantees to be honest with us so that we can support them better and understand the context of their work.”

**(large family foundation)**

“ We have presented to various groups sharing our strategy, learnings, mistakes and success. Grantees and other stakeholders were involved in strategy creation and challenge.”

**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We publish on 360Giving and have joined IVAR’s open and trusting grant-making initiative.”

**(large family foundation)**

“ We are members of several membership organisations. We have participated in sector wide initiatives such as the Charity Governance Code. We participate in international networks.”

**(small international foundation)**

# INVESTMENT

For many foundations, an endowment is their 'super-power'. Financial independence and a long time horizon provide unique opportunities to work towards achieving the foundation's impact, to effect change, and to withstand financial turbulence. A well-managed investment portfolio is the engine that powers a foundation's activity – providing vital resource for grant-making and other activities – and financial returns are important to ensure the ongoing viability of the foundation model.

But maintaining or growing the value of a foundation's capital is not a charitable purpose nor an end in itself. Considering how, and to what extent, investments can align with mission, and how to take the wider social and environmental impact of investments into account, can be challenging to put into practice, but is an essential feature of stronger foundation practice.

All foundations will need to move forward at pace to avoid falling behind or being forced to change by regulatory or legislative demands, and the climate crisis means intentional investment to achieve social good is both necessary and urgent. Society is demanding ever greater transparency from institutions and asset holders about the sources of their wealth and how it is invested and stewarded. New approaches to creating a sustainable economy are emerging, while social purpose and environmental investments are achieving strong financial returns.

**1 UNDERSTANDS THAT RESPONSIBILITY FOR ITS INVESTMENTS SITS WITH EACH AND EVERY MEMBER OF THE TRUSTEE BOARD**

**2 PRIORITISES ITS MISSION WHEN SETTING ITS INVESTMENT OBJECTIVES**

**3 ENGAGES WITH AND HOLDS TO ACCOUNT THOSE MANAGING ITS INVESTMENTS**

**4 PURSUES TRANSPARENCY AND RESPONDS TO SCRUTINY**

**5 ACTIVELY SEEKS A VARIETY OF RESEARCH AND VIEWS TO INFORM ITS APPROACH TO INVESTMENT**

**6 REVIEWS ITS OWN TIME-HORIZON**

**7 SEEKS TO POSITIVELY INFLUENCE THE BEHAVIOUR OF OTHERS IN RELATION TO INVESTMENTS**



# INVESTMENT

“ We feel that this is quite well embedded within the trustee board and that everyone takes part in the big picture discussions about finance and investment at the full board meeting. We have two relatively new trustees and we could perhaps make it clear that they would be very welcome to join the finance sub-committee if they wish and that input from everyone is welcome.”  
**(small family foundation)**

“ All trustees receive investment papers. Strategic investment decisions made by all trustees. All trustees receive regular investment training. Investment sub-committee membership reviewed annually.”  
**(small international foundation)**

“ Considering our time-horizon in relation to the urgency of the climate crisis (which is already having a huge impact in our sector).”  
**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We are conscious of our mission when setting our investment objectives and place requirements on our fund managers accordingly.”  
**(large corporate foundation)**

“ Comprehensive investment information published in annual report. In 2019 and 2020 annual reports we detailed our plan and progress towards reinvesting our funds ethically.”  
**(small international foundation)**

“ We took early action on the issue of investment as a foundation and as a result our investments have been aligned with our mission for a long time. We are constantly increasing our ambition and encouraging our investment managers to go further and take bold action. We undertake a lot of engagement activity as part of the Churches Responsible Investment Network.”  
**(small family foundation)**

“ Trustees have approved investment policy which excludes areas that are counter to our mission. Trustees have agreed to adopt a total return approach in order to facilitate investing in ethical investments . Tender in place to change funds to ones that meet this policy. Small social investment has been made.”  
**(small international foundation)**

“ We challenge our investment managers to meet our ambitious objectives and to go further and do more. We recognise that their drivers are different to ours but feel that our ambition has served them well in encouraging them to greater efforts.”  
**(small family foundation)**

“ We engage deeply with those managing our investments to understand their investment criteria, assessment process and research, and to identify areas of mission alignment and points of difference.”  
**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We are funding Share Action, signatories of the Funder Commitment on Climate Change, members of CRIN and FIRM Networks and the ACF Social Impact Investors Group (SIIG).”  
**(large independent foundation)**

“ We are very involved with networks of other investors interested in responsible investment, both in learning, engaging with corporate interest to ensure that the interests of diverse voices are heard and heeded, and in developing best practice.”  
**(small family foundation)**

“ We are entirely transparent and publish the details of all our underlying investments in our annual accounts and on our website, along with our Investment Policy Statement and our exclusions / negative screens. We have thought about and understand our grantees potential concerns relating to investments and actively invite comment or questions about our approach.”  
**(small family foundation)**

“ Having recently taken the decision to devote the entire resources of the foundation in this crucial decade for the climate to our mission to achieve a just society based on a commitment to nonviolence and environmental sustainability, we have reviewed our time horizon accordingly.”  
**(small family foundation)**

# FUNDING PRACTICES

The overwhelming majority of foundations fund others in order to achieve their mission. For many of our closest stakeholders, a foundation's approach to funding is what impacts on them the most and which shapes their view of foundations. As the last two years has clearly shown, funding practices are at the sharp end. They are where the rubber hits the road; the interface through which foundations interact most intimately with those that they fund.

Stronger foundations think hard about the demands that they place on others: the cost of applying, the cost of managing information requirements for a grant, the cost of reporting, and the cost of gathering any data and financial information. Fundamentally this is about effectiveness – maximising the impact of the charitable resources that foundations have at their

disposal, reducing bureaucracy and needless process, and improving the system of information and application process for the applicant to benefit both applicants and grantees – and therefore their beneficiaries and causes.

Stronger foundations that achieve more for their mission will be even more important at this time of national crisis than when we started the Stronger Foundations programme. Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequalities in societies across the globe and added to existing challenges like climate change and an ageing society. Now, perhaps more than ever, foundations need to be ambitious and effective in the way that they use their funding for social good at this crucial time.

**1 IDENTIFIES AND SELECTS FUNDING PRACTICES THAT ARE MOST LIKELY TO FULFIL ITS MISSION, AND DESIGNS ITS PROCESSES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ITS VALUES**

**2 RECOGNISES THE UNIQUE AND VITAL ROLE OF GRANT FUNDING AND IS AWARE OF THE VARIETY OF GRANTS THAT CAN BE MADE AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF EACH TYPE**

**3 SEEKS TO ACHIEVE POSITIVE IMPACT BEYOND A FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTION**

**4 PROACTIVELY STRIVES TO UNDERSTAND THE EFFECTS OF ITS FUNDING ON OTHERS, AND SEEKS TO AVOID AND REDRESS HARM**

**5 REGULARLY REVIEWS ITS FUNDING PRACTICES AS PART OF A CULTURE OF LEARNING AND THINKS COLLABORATIVELY TO ENHANCE ITS IMPACT**



# FUNDING PRACTICES

“ We are fully aware of the vital role of grant-funding. As a small foundation we don't have different grant programmes but we endeavour to bring best practice to our grant-making and consider impact throughout. We recognise the importance of time considerations – both in the respect of having a short decision making timetable, an element of flexibility when required and an understanding of the importance of multi-year funding for planning and in time spent filling applications and reports that could be better spent doing the work.”  
**(small family foundation)**

“ We work in partnership with our grantees to ensure the funding is responsive and appropriate to their needs.”  
**(large family foundation)**

“ We have developed our approach within a clear and inclusive strategy and focus our tools on those that have the greatest impact/feedback from grantees/sector research.”  
**(small corporate foundation)**

“ We have given a lot of consideration to our assets and as a smaller funder we are able to be responsive and flexible in our grant-making. We back an organisation's mission, values and ambition broadly and – if we feel we can be a useful partner – we usually provide unrestricted funding. We do not have funding cycles or programme and are constantly considering the relevance and impact of all of the grants we make. We ask potential grant recipients to tell us what they need so they do not have to shape themselves to fit a framework.”  
**(small independent foundation)**

“ We work extensively with grant recipients to provide capacity building, increasing their professional relationships, providing expert advice, providing support, help raise their profile.”  
**(small international foundation)**

“ We provide non-financial professional development and consultancy support and are genuinely relational in our approach.”  
**(large family foundation)**

“ We are relational and have a maximum of 30 grants at any time, giving us capacity to stay in touch with our grant-holders' needs, concerns, challenges. We talk to our grant-holders about our work, what we are struggling with, excited by, perplexed by, don't feel we are good at. We listen. We make sure they know we are both entering into a partnership where we are learning together.”  
**(small independent foundation)**

“ We learned a lot through the Covid-19 response about the art of the possible on this front. We have grown our grants team and have more capacity now. We are now much more collaborative as a funder and contributing to various initiatives.”  
**(large independent foundation)**

“ We have introduced a limited toolbox of funding options, and have flexibility over use of these options.”  
**(small international funder)**

“ We actively consider whether our grants might be doing harm and encourage frank and open communication with grantees. We do not penalise honesty from our grantees and are willing to adapt grants and show flexibility when required.”  
**(large family foundation)**

“ We use our experience of working in different charities, grant-seeking and reporting as well as feedback from our partners to shape our practices.”  
**(small independent foundation)**

“ Our emphasis on lived experience in social action is a way to redress possible harms.”  
**(large independent foundation)**

“ Each September we review policy and each following February we have Blue Sky meetings to think about the future and have plenty of time to put new items in place for our first meeting in a financial year.”  
**(small City livery company)**

# WHAT CAN FOUNDATIONS DO NEXT?

**We hope that this report will inspire all foundations to pursue the pillars of stronger foundation practice.**

**Our invitation to all ACF members is:**

## **If you've not yet used the self-assessment tool, give it a try**

- ▶ It's quick and easy to use, and members report a wide range of benefits
- ▶ Consider taking it to a board meeting as the basis for a discussion about strategy, governance or operations
- ▶ Ask trustees or investment committee to complete the Investment survey
- ▶ Invite staff to complete one, and compare answers with that of trustees
- ▶ Take it to a staff away day
- ▶ If working as the only member of staff, consider using it to inform a board paper

## **If you've used it already, consider using it again in the future**

- ▶ We recommend foundations repeat the process after six to 12 months in order to track progress and allow enough time for changes to occur

## **Once you've used the tool, consider sharing it with others. You could:**

- ▶ Write a blog about your experience
- ▶ Put some headline findings in a newsletter
- ▶ Tweet about it to your followers using the hashtag #StrongerFoundations

## **Please let ACF know how you get on and whether the tool could be improved**

- ▶ Email [policy@acf.org.uk](mailto:policy@acf.org.uk)
- ▶ Complete the tool's two-minute feedback survey
- ▶ Keep an eye on ACF's learning and events programme, which aligns to the pillars and will support your journey towards becoming stronger foundations

# APPENDIX: INSIGHTS FROM THE SELF-ASSESSMENT SCORES

**When using the self-assessment tool, foundations assigned themselves a score from 1–5 for each of the pillars:**

1. Not yet considered
2. Just getting started
3. Made some progress
4. At a fairly advanced stage
5. Fully embedded

The table below show the average aggregated scores for each thematic area.

Thematic area	Average scores given across all pillars in that theme
Funding Practices	3.6
Transparency and Engagement	3.5
Investment	3.3
Strategy and Governance	3.3
Impact and Learning	3.1
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	2.6

As this table shows, there is a gap in how foundations consider their effectiveness in relation to diversity, equity and inclusion compared to the other thematic areas. Funding practices is the area where foundations are most confident.

While the average scores for other themes looks similar, there are some interesting nuances. For example, most foundations score themselves a 3 for Strategy and Governance, while scores are widely spread for Impact and Learning (with several at the extremes of 1 and 5). On investment, most believe they have made some progress (a score of 3) but a minority believe the pillars are fully embedded (scoring 5).

The tables on page 19–20 show a breakdown of the top five rated pillars (out of all 40 pillars) that foundations feel most confident with, and bottom five where they feel they have the furthest to travel.

# APPENDIX

The five highest rated pillars from across the thematic areas are:

Top scoring pillars	Theme	Average score
We enable an internal culture of transparency and engagement	Transparency and Engagement	3.9
We proactively engage external audiences	Transparency and Engagement	3.9
We seek to achieve positive impact beyond a financial contribution	Funding Practices	3.8
We identify and select funding practices that are most likely to fulfil our mission, and design our processes in accordance with our values	Funding Practices	3.8
We have a deep understanding of our vision, mission and values and articulate them publicly	Strategy and Governance	3.7

Within the three thematic areas not represented in the overall top five, the most highly rated pillars are:

Highest scoring pillar within the theme	Theme	Average score
We invest time and resources in understanding and defining DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	3.1
We understand our mission and the impact we are trying to achieve	Impact and Learning	3.5
We review our own time horizon	Investment	3.7

# APPENDIX

The five lowest rated pillars from across the thematic areas are:

Lowest scoring pillars	Theme	Average score
We express our DEI commitment, policies and practices publicly	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	2.2
We collaborate with others to promote and implement DEI practices	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	2.4
We collect, track and publish data on our own practices and performances	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	2.5
We use our own power to advocate for and advance DEI practices	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	2.7
We pursue transparency and respond to scrutiny	Investment	2.7

Within the four thematic areas not represented in the overall lowest five, the lowest rated pillars for each theme are:

Lowest scoring pillar within the theme	Theme	Average score
We proactively seek to understand how our operations affect others and to avoid and redress harm	Impact and Learning	2.9
We recognise the importance and implications of time	Strategy and Governance	3.0
We understand the importance of transparency and engagement and articulate our approach	Transparency and Engagement	3.2
We proactively strive to understand the effects of our funding on others, and seek to avoid and redress harm	Funding Practices	3.6

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