

Issue 02

The NCVO Members Quick Guide to

Writing a Fantastic Funding Bid

Who should I apply to?

The ten things that funders look for

How can I show what impact funding will have?

How can I increase my chances of receiving further funding?

NCVO champions and strengthens the voluntary sector, from the largest charities to the smallest community organisations. Inspired and empowered by our 8,500 members, we make sure the voluntary sector can do what it does best. Improve the world around it.

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Writing a funding bid is a time-consuming business and, with more organisations chasing shrinking sources of support, it's important to get it right first time. This guide presents NCVO members with expert advice on making the best possible application, essential dos and don'ts, and details of the help and support that's available.

Who should I apply to?

"Everybody" might seem the obvious answer here, but think again. Applications shouldn't just be determined by whether you're eligible for a certain pot of money - it's also important to consider the aims of those you're applying to.

Understanding a funder's priorities is the key to a successful bid. Think about what it is that the body you're applying to is trying to achieve, and how this fits in with what you do and what you're proposing.

If your application spells out how your work can further a funder's goals, then you will have the beginnings of a strong case. Here and throughout, remember that a good application is not just about doing the research - it's also about showing you've done it.

If a funder's work doesn't compliment your own, then take heed: it might make more sense to concentrate your efforts elsewhere. Don't try and make a square peg fit a round hole, advises John Mulligan, Senior Grants Manager at Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. "If work genuinely doesn't fit with our priorities there is no point pretending it does. Applicants might benefit from making fewer but better targeted applications."

On the other hand, if a funder has previously supported projects similar to your own, they're clearly worth targeting. "People should ask: what specifically have we got to offer that this funder might support and what is the evidence of that?" says Mr Mulligan.

The ten things that funders look for

1. Need:

“Funders want projects that meet a genuine need, and for you to have evidence of that need,” says Olof Williamson, Sustainable Funding Senior Officer at NCVO. They’ll also want to know exactly how their money will help improve things. Linda Kelly, Chief Executive of the Lloyds TSB Foundation says it is also important to “be able to articulate and demonstrate the difference your work makes.”

2. Clarity of purpose:

Ensure that your aims are clearly described. This means more than just listing your goals: funders will also want to know how you intend to achieve them. “We see a lot of general statements and too much explanation of the need for the work, rather than explanations of the work itself,” says John Mulligan, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

3. A measure of success:

How will you measure the impact of your work? What would constitute a positive outcome? Most funders will want you to address these questions in your application – if you don’t know what success looks like, then you’re unlikely to instil confidence in those holding the purse strings.

4. A realistic budget:

Budgets should be realistic, transparent, and (if appropriate) take into account any costs that might be incurred in the course of your project or work. Funders will also want to know that you can do your sums. “Ensure that your figures add up - check and triple check!” urges Mr Mulligan.

5. Competence:

Proving that you can deliver is crucial, says Ben Wittenberg, Director of Publishing, Policy and Research at the Directory for Social Change (DSC). Make sure that your goals are realistic, and demonstrate competence by showing what you’ve achieved in the past.

6. Acknowledgement of potential problems:

“Acknowledging where the risks lie, and more importantly what you’ve done to mitigate them, shows you understand that you’re operating in the real world and you’ve thought through what you are planning,” says Mr Wittenberg.

7. Vision:

“An application is an opportunity to communicate the distinctiveness of your work, your values, your passion, your success and your potential,” says Mr Mulligan. Think about the competition you’re likely to be up against: why should your organisation be the one that receives funding?

8. Flexibility:

That said, if you operate in a particularly competitive area, don’t underestimate the virtues of potential collaboration. Funders may be impressed if you demonstrate that you’re willing to consider working in partnership with other organisations in order to deliver best value, and you may consequently stand more chance of funding success.

9. An exit strategy:

Even if one isn’t specifically required. “If you make no mention of what you will do when their money runs out, [funders] will assume either that you haven’t thought about it, or that your default exit strategy is to come back to them and ask for more - neither of which are likely to impress them,” says Mr Wittenberg.

10. Attention to detail:

Answer all the questions and provide all the necessary documentation (in the multiples required). If an SAE (stamped addressed envelope) is asked for, send one. Ensure that your final application is free from spelling and grammatical errors, and always heed the deadline.

How can I show what impact funding will have?

Showing what impact funding will have can be tricky but, as John Mulligan of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, comments, “The best way to demonstrate the likely impact of the work is by telling us what has been achieved previously.”

In practice, this will usually mean providing a variety of evidence: not just statistics, but a story, case studies, quotes and so on. “You should use what’s most appropriate for your project,” says Mr Mulligan.

Don’t neglect the bigger picture, though. “Focus on the strategic impact as well as the operational impact,” advises Ben Wittenberg, DSC. “The direct project outcomes are useful and important, but demonstrating wider impact in terms of how the work will contribute to the achievement of your (and hopefully the funder’s) vision, mission, and strategic aims is much more powerful.”

Tops tips for style and tone

- Avoid jargon at all costs. Clarity and transparency are key. “Keep it factual and back things up with well-chosen evidence,” says John Mulligan, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. “There is no special funding ‘language’ that works better than a clear description of achievements and proposed activities.”
- Remember that empty rhetoric impresses no one. As Mr Mulligan, emphasises, funders will be looking for outputs to be specific and substantiated, where possible. “For example, rather than ‘many people will benefit’, say ‘30 children under the age of 14 will receive an average of two hours musical tuition per week.’”
- Where the overall difference made by a grant cannot be expressed in such tangible terms, try to avoid bold or sweeping statements. Funders will appreciate some texture and detail –for example, concise anecdotal accounts.
- When it comes to tone, take your cues from the organisations that you’re applying to. “Look at the materials they have put into the world and use that to inform how you communicate with them,” says Ben Wittenberg, DSC. Try to ensure that your tone matches theirs.
- Bear in mind who will be reviewing your application - as Olof Williamson of NCVO observes, in the case of smaller trusts and foundations, it might well be a team of volunteers. Make it easy for them to understand your case and keep to the point.
- Never assume that a funding body will have prior knowledge of your organisation, even if you’ve applied to them in the past. Always provide a succinct summary of your organisation and its work, and avoid puzzling acronyms.

The dos

Do read – and heed – the guidelines. If you don’t meet a funder’s eligibility criteria, don’t waste your time (and theirs) by applying.

Do learn as much as you can about a funder before applying and tailor your application to fit. Generic “cut and paste” appeals for support are unlikely to impress.

Do remember that there may be restrictions on how funds can be spent. Ensure that you’re clear about all the terms and conditions to which a grant might be subject (and any costs attached to these).

Do seek help if you need it. Most funding bodies will be happy to provide assistance if you’re unclear about an aspect of the application process, and many provide detailed guidance on how to apply on their websites or in other literature.

Do get someone unconnected with your organisation to read your application. If they can’t understand the case you’re making, you’ll need to think again.

Do keep a copy of your application and supporting materials. Not only is this essential if there’s a query or problem with your bid, it will save time when it comes to making your next application.

Do keep a file of “supporting evidence”: press cuttings, comments from service users and so on. All can play a vital part in making your case.

Do learn from unsuccessful applications. Not all funding bodies will be able to provide feedback, but it’s always worth asking.

The don’ts

Don’t send masses of extraneous documentation. You don’t want your case to be obscured by irrelevant material.

Don’t forget that processing an application takes time. If your project is time-sensitive, be realistic about how soon any funding might arrive.

Don’t be greedy. While it may be tempting to ask for the largest permissible sum, it’s rarely advisable. “Funders may be wary if you ask for the maximum amount without showing how you arrived at that figure and precisely why it’s needed,” says Olof Williamson of NCVO.

Don’t play the numbers. “Better a few very well targeted applications than blanket appeals,” says Ben Wittenberg of DSC.

How can I increase my chances of receiving further funding?

1. Complete monitoring or progress reports fully and in a timely fashion.

“One leading funder told me recently that less than 30% of their grantees provide their progress reports on time,” says Ben Wittenberg, DSC.

2. Be prepared to go the extra mile.

“See getting the money initially as a good start, but work to maintain the relationship, keep your end of the bargain, and look beyond reporting the operational outcomes of your funded work. Communicate how the work contributes to the shared bigger picture/vision that you both have,” advises Mr Wittenberg.

3. Be truthful in your feedback, even if things haven’t worked out as well as you’d hoped.

“Honesty and a positive commitment to learn from the grant will keep you in a funder’s mind,” says John Mulligan, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

4. Make it personal.

“If you can, develop a personal relationship with someone in the trust or foundation,” advises Olof Williamson of NCVO. “Get in touch well in advance of when you need more funding to find out what their current aims are – don’t just go to them in a crisis.”

5. Say thank you.

Acknowledging the support of funders in your own publicity and promotional material is vital.

Sources of advice and funding

For NCVO Members

FREE

Tailored Funding emails
Members helpdesk

DISCOUNTED

Publications:
The Art of Raising Money
Good Financial Management Guide

Online training with KnowHow Nonprofit's
Study zone
Regional Training and Consultancy
from our SFP Team, 02075202519

Other Services

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

NCVO's website is full of detailed advice on applying for funding. Our team of NCVO consultants provide bespoke advice on income strategy, and our wider Directory of Approved Consultants includes many fundraising experts.

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/advice-support/funding-finance
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/DAC

KnowHow NonProfit

The KnowHow NonProfit site includes tips on writing successful funding bids.

www.knowhownonprofit.org

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action

NAVCA's website provides details of local Council for Voluntary Services, who may be able to offer relevant advice and support.

www.navca.org.uk

Funding Central

The Funding Central site lists over 4,000 funding and finance opportunities. It also provides a wealth of resources to aid in the application process, including tips from experienced fundraisers and a guide to making a case for support.

www.fundingcentral.org.uk

Directory of Social Change

Directory of Social Change provide a whole range of practical fundraising training courses and publications, as well as online databases of funding opportunities.

www.dsc.org.uk

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is one of the largest grant-making organisations in the UK. The Foundation's website includes a "hints and tips" page, as well as details of funding priorities, case studies, and examples of grants that have been made.

www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk

Lloyds TSB Foundation for England and Wales

The Lloyds TSB Foundation funds local, regional and national charities working to deliver lasting change for disadvantaged individuals and communities in England and Wales. Its website includes an online eligibility questionnaire, FAQs, and a list of common reasons for unsuccessful applications.

www.lloydstsbfoundations.org.uk

The Co-operative Membership Community Fund

Helps local projects throughout the UK and is allocated by local area committees. Its website provides information on how to apply, FAQs, and terms and conditions.

www.co-operative.coop/communityfund

Big Lottery Fund

Funds community groups and projects that improve health, education and the environment. Case studies and a "fund finder" tool are included on the website.

www.biglotteryfund.org.uk