

The Common Application Form (CAF) – Assessing Its Impact and Future

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Executive Summary of Report

Report Methodology and Aims

The report was researched and written by Dr. Katy Adams (Academic Researcher, University of Sheffield) in November 2025. It surveyed the Common Application Form (CAF) created by Yorkshire Funders in response to the challenges facing nonprofits applying for financial support from grant-making bodies. Additionally, it sought to understand the extent to which Yorkshire Funders had achieved its goal of improving nonprofits' experiences of applying for grants by creating the CAF and aimed to identify barriers to the form's impact, offering recommendations as to next steps.

Interviews were conducted with a range of representatives from funders and nonprofits, offering a broad range of voices and experiences. Where appropriate, external literature and publicly available information was used to supplement or contextualise findings.

Wider Context

The CAF was launched into an environment in a state of post-Covid flux; whilst the traditional power imbalance between funder and nonprofits continues to impact on the nature and impact of their relationship, there are also examples of more equitable collaborations and co-working.

Summary of Key Findings

- The CAF is generally viewed positively by both funders and nonprofits. It helps nonprofits provide the appropriate information clearly and allows funders to compare applications quickly and easily.
- The CAF's uptake is characterised by fluidity, with funders personalising the form in a variety of ways. Permitting such flexibility is seen as necessary to ensure the CAF's adoption, allowing funders to meet internal governance requirements and to continue to work in a relational manner with nonprofits.
- The CAF could help nonprofits more if it were to be adopted by a larger number of funders with the greatest possible degree of commonality. This would allow nonprofits to 'cut and paste' applications, saving time and resources. Publicising the CAF to encourage such increased uptake will take resources, energy and patience.

Conclusions

The CAF has been welcomed by participants from the funding and voluntary sectors, and the CAF taskforce has succeeded in creating a set of questions which make it easier for nonprofits to apply for funding.

Despite its benefits and funder uptake, the CAF was, however, revealed to not yet be achieving its full potential: its adoption by funders has not reached the point at which nonprofits can benefit from being able to 'cut and paste' their answers across multiple applications.

Achieving the commonality represented by the CAF stands in tension with funders' desires for personalisation and flexibility. Funders' choices around whether to implement the CAF and in what form will therefore directly determine the CAF's impact.

Encouraging the success of the CAF for nonprofits is not simply a matter of increasing the number of funders who adopt the CAF but also a question of increasing funders' willingness to take decisions in the best interest of nonprofits, as well as themselves. Steps need to be taken to enable and encourage individual funders to use their power and privilege to make choices which benefit both them and their potential beneficiaries.

Continuing the work of the initial taskforce requires a wider commitment to the CAF as not just a product, but also an approach and philosophy to grant allocation. Without this, the CAF will continue to be of benefit, but risk never truly reaching its full potential.