

# The Common Application Form



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The Common Application Form (CAF) of the Yorkshire Funders is a set of questions designed to make it easier and quicker for nonprofits to apply for financial support from grant-making organisations. Currently known to be used by 13 funders both regionally and nationally, it was developed by a taskforce of local funders, which continues to review it at regular intervals.

To assess the impact of the CAF to date, interviews were held during summer 2025 with nine funders and nonprofits about their experiences of the form. Related documentation was also examined.

Chief findings include:

- Yorkshire Funders' members are experiencing challenges and changes similar to those reported in the wider funding sector. These centre around a power imbalance between funders and nonprofits, attempts to diminish the impact of this imbalance via moves towards trust-based relational philanthropy, and funder appreciation of their position in the hierarchy.
- The successful and efficient creation of the CAF was enabled by a number of factors, including committed individuals with adequate time and capacity to contribute and a willingness amongst funders to compromise and seek commonality.
- 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 is generally viewed positively by both funders and nonprofits. It helps nonprofits provide the appropriate information clearly, something particularly valuable to smaller organisations. It also allows funders to compare applications quickly and easily.
- 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.



This report subsequently draws the following conclusions:

- The full benefits of the CAF's wider uptake will only be felt by nonprofits and funders if:
  - a large number of funders use the CAF; and
  - nonprofits are able to duplicate their answers across multiple funders.
- Achieving such communality 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.
- As a result, increasing the impact of the CAF requires:
  - taking practical steps to increase uptake through raising awareness of the form and its potential; and
  - supporting funders to recognise the impact of their choices around implementation.

The extent of this challenge within a funding sector often marked by difference, individuality and limited resources may be considerable. The ethos of the CAF's development, however, that positive change should be attempted even when full success is not guaranteed, suggests that it may nevertheless be a challenge worth embracing.

# Introduction

This report surveys the Common Application Form (CAF) created by Yorkshire Funders in response to the challenges facing nonprofits applying for financial support from grant-making bodies.

Since its launch the CAF has undergone a number of iterations and is currently known to be used by 13 funders (Appendix One), predominantly in the Yorkshire region but also more widely across the UK. Researchers at the University of Sheffield with experience of the funding sector were delighted to discover this initiative, leading to one researcher writing this report in support of the CAF's aims and achievements.

This report seeks to understand the extent to which Yorkshire Funders has achieved its goal of improving nonprofits' experiences of applying for grants through creating the CAF. It also looks to uncover barriers to the form's impact and makes recommendations as to next steps.

The report uses data from interviews and desktop research to better understand the CAF, including the context in which it was created, the impetus behind its development, how it is being used by funding organisations, the difference it makes to both funders and nonprofits and the factors influencing its wider impact.

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## Methodology

During July and August 2025, nine interviews were held with a range of representatives from funders and nonprofits (Appendix Two). Participants were sourced by Yorkshire Funders, who sought to provide access to a broad range of voices and experiences. Frontline participants were compensated financially for their time.

Interviews lasted around 45 minutes and covered a range of topics, including the reasoning behind the CAF, the practicalities around its development, the difference it was making and the enablers and barriers to this impact. Interviews were recorded, following which they were transcribed and anonymised in line with University of Sheffield guidelines. Interview transcripts were then analysed alongside publicly available information about the CAF and records of a related discussion with the Funders Collaborative Hub in October 2023.

Where appropriate, external literature and discussion has been included to supplement or contextualise findings. Throughout, the goal has been to give as much weight as possible to the voices of participants, allowing their experiences and knowledge to shape conclusions.



# Limitations

As with any research, this report will invariably have gaps and fail to tackle certain issues. Two chief limitations are as follows:

(i) The data set for this report is small and, despite best efforts, contains more funders than nonprofits. Other than in one case (CAF6 and CAF7), interviews were also only undertaken with one representative from each organisation. Additional detailed investigation (both qualitative and quantitative) would be required for a more reliable and nuanced assessment. As such, the experiences described and the conclusions drawn may not fully reflect the views of everyone involved with the CAF.

(ii) The capacity of Yorkshire Funders and participants to manage and track the CAF's take-up is limited. This report uses the best information available at the time of writing: it cannot, however, be said with certainty that it reflects all the ways in which the CAF is being used.

**We've changed our application mechanism  
so we've got no way to track what  
difference the form has made specifically  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

# Terminology

When first created, the CAF was known as the Yorkshire Common Application Form, or YCAF. In order to encourage wider uptake by funders from other regions, as well as to reflect the importance of the Form's 'common' nature, going forward the YCAF will be known as the CAF. The term CAF is therefore used in this report other than when quoting participants directly.

# The CAF's wider context

The CAF has been 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-work.

Discussions with participants revealed how issues and shifts seen in the wider funding sector were present amongst Yorkshire Funders' network.

**Relationships vary between funders & nonprofits depending on the funder strategy & approach... there's not a uniform relationship. They're all different... varying from dependency & transactional... to collaboration & partnership (CAF2, Voluntary Sector)**

## (i) Power imbalances and missed opportunities for mutual benefit

Relationships between funders and recipients have long been characterised by top-down power within a hierarchy often criticised for awarding funders undemocratic influence over responses to societal issues. Funders choose which recipients, and therefore which issues, receive attention and backing, and nonprofits, often facing considerable financial and capacity-related challenges, may find themselves under pressure to align their organisational goals and processes with funders' preferences, such is their need for support [1,2]. Nonprofits have also been shown as reticent to provide honest feedback about their experiences due to fears around "biting the hand that feeds them", preventing transparent and positive feedback of potential benefit to both parties [3].

Interviews with participants from both the funding and voluntary sectors reflected this situation. Funders were seen to occupy a powerful position which enabled them to determine nonprofit ability to access support. This was also seen to threaten nonprofits' willingness to openly and honestly engage with funders out of fear of losing much-needed support. Funders described how such transactional, performative relationships harmed their ability to improve.

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[1] Bouchard, M. & Raufflet, E. (2019). Domesticating the Beast. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 48(6): 1186-1209.

[2] Wiepking, P. & de Wit, A. (2021). Unrestricted funding and nonprofit capacities: Developing a conceptual model, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 34: 801-824.

[3] Fiennes, C. & Wulf, L. (2014). How funders can better understand their performance: Five easy tools, White Paper, <https://giving-evidence.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/giving-evidence-tracking-funders-performance-white-paper-feb-2014.pdf>

**The origins of the grant sector... track into a structure where it was... the great & the good, the wealthy making choices to support... The mechanism that's then been developed... has been based [on this]... rather clumsy power relationship & power structure  
(CAF3, Voluntary Sector)**

**It's difficult understanding what the barriers are... & how [nonprofits] feel about us... It's so difficult to know if what they're telling you is just what they think you want to hear... [Being] honest... is great because we can fix it & we can make it better  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

**The negatives of power dynamics mean not-for-profits can't be honest  
(CAF2, Funding Sector)**

## **(ii) Complicated, wasteful application processes**

Nonprofits, particularly smaller organisations, have often been seen to struggle with the demands made on them by funding allocation processes. Locating the right funder and writing a compelling application which successfully reflects the organisation can demand time, experience and skill-sets beyond the reach of some nonprofits [4]. Such challenges are increasing as nonprofits are faced with needing extra funds to meet increasing demand [5].

Again, many participants recognised these issues. They described the challenges for nonprofits of locating suitable support, as well as how the intrinsically competitive nature of grant-funding meant nonprofits spent considerable resources negotiating multiple different application processes to increase their chances of success. Some additionally highlighted how the system also required funders, who are themselves often struggling with internal capacity, to assess large numbers of applications, the majority of which would not succeed.

**The image of the funder is that they've got the best technology... lots of people... particularly with the smaller funders, that's not the case... both parties are fighting similar battles  
(CAF5, Funding Sector)**

**Small... organisations... don't necessarily have the expertise or the capacity within their team to do... the fundraising stuff  
(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)**

**I've seen funders inundated with applications... the landscape is so cruel  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)**

**People... find it really hard to find those organisations that may fund them  
(CAF6, Funding Sector)**

[4] Dayson, C. et al. (2021). The Value of Small in a Big Crisis, Lloyds Bank Foundation.

[https://www.lloydsbankfoundation.org.uk/media/t5op0gwl/lbfew\\_full-report\\_value-small-big-crisis.pdf](https://www.lloydsbankfoundation.org.uk/media/t5op0gwl/lbfew_full-report_value-small-big-crisis.pdf)

[5] IVAF (2025). Anchored to purpose: Staying true to charity mission in choppy waters.



Participants also explained the challenges they faced when determining which questions to include on their application forms. Funders needed to ensure they could obtain enough information to make a reliable decision and satisfy internal governance requirements. They also, however, needed to not overwhelm either party by asking for unnecessary information, using inaccessible language or adopting an overly complicated application process.

Finally, an awareness of organisational capacity and expertise was seen as particularly important in relation to smaller organisations on both sides of the relationship: not only nonprofits but also funders could struggle to find people with the right skills to navigate, complete and assess applications.

**Groups are just putting the same thing again & again... it's just wasting their... really precious time**  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)

**They're reading through hundreds of application forms for quite a small pot of money**  
(CAF1, Funding Sector)

**A lot of grant making is predicated on the basis of competition... & typically... you receive far more applications than you can ever fund**  
(CAF3, Funding Sector)

**When funders... just give vague guidance... you don't know if you're hitting the right note**  
(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)

### **(iii) Collaboration and mutual support**

In contrast to the competition between nonprofits seeking support, participants stressed the collaborative nature of the funding sector in the region. Connected via their common goal of supporting nonprofits, funders worked together, encouraging each other, helping to link applicants to other funders, and sharing experiences and learnings.

**We work collaboratively... there isn't that competition... to... realise you're not on your own, that's been really useful**  
(CAF1, Funding Sector)

**I have never come across competition. It's more often that we are pointing people to other funders**  
(CAF7, Funding Sector)

#### **(iv) Increased self-awareness and reflection**

Funders described a shift towards a more critical reflection on their own power and position, catalysing wider change and challenging individual organisations to reflect on their own practices and image.

**The funding sector has become a bit more self-aware in recent times... most of the changes occurring as a result of that are positive. They're going in the right direction**  
**(CAF3, Funding Sector)**

**I think there is some good stuff going on & part of that is being self-aware enough as a funder to ask ourselves the question: 'Where does that take us? Where does that lead us?'**  
**(CAF3, Funding Sector)**

As a result, there was movement towards more equal relationships between funders and nonprofits, mirroring wider sectoral shifts towards funders displaying an “intent to advance equity” [6]. Participants spoke repeatedly about increased trust- and dialogue-based, relational funding in which nonprofits felt able to speak honestly and funders actively sought to be more transparent and approachable, as well as more comfortable having less oversight of how nonprofits used funds.

**[Funder-recipient relationships] work best when they are partners... giving & taking on both sides... when interests & priorities are really aligned... that's when it works & that's when you're most likely to get the funding & they're going to feel invested in what you're doing**  
**(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)**

**There's a lot of trust in the sector... you've got to... present yourself as a fund that's trying to do the right thing & is genuine and caring**  
**(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

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[6] Coffman, J. & Reid, C. (2024), Emerging trust-based evaluation approaches in philanthropy in Newcomer, K. & Mumford, S. (Eds.). *Research Handbook on Program Evaluation*, EE Publishing.

# The CAF's goals

Through providing a set of standard questions, the CAF seeks to “make the application process for grant seekers easier and faster” [7]. Conceptually, it can also be seen as an attempt to tackle funder privilege and the power imbalance in funder-nonprofit relationships. As a simple application process used by nonprofits every time they apply for support, the CAF thus aligns with the previously discussed shifts in the wider funding environment towards heightened funder awareness of power hierarchies between funders and nonprofits.

**Being aligned was supposed to be better for everybody... to make things easier... streamlined  
(CAF1, Funding Sector)**

**We just wanted to make it simpler. That's our focus... If we can make it easier, we'll make it easier  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

**It stems from a place of beginning to understand the realities... for the people applying for the money... This was something that needed... content genuinely relevant to the people... using it  
(CAF3, Funding Sector)**

**[We're] trying to make it easy for the nonprofit sector... we should not be making people jump hoops... If they knew what questions to expect, they could have planned answers that they could... paste in  
(CAF2, Funding Sector)**

The rest of this report considers the extent to which the CAF has managed to achieve its stated aim. It reveals how the CAF is seen as supporting nonprofits through helping them to provide the information funders need. It also describes how using the CAF has enabled funders to assess applications more quickly and easily.

It also however, discusses how the CAF's ability to support nonprofits depends upon the balance funders are willing to strike between individuality and commonality and, as a result, how the extent to which the application process is simplified for nonprofits depends not only on the uptake of the CAF but also on the degree of consistency across funders' versions of the form

Funders, however, appear unwilling to relinquish their individuality. As such, the report acknowledges the challenges facing the CAF and what meeting these and growing the CAF's impact requires in practice.

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[7] <https://www.yorkshirefunders.org.uk/ycaf/>

# The CAF's creation

The CAF was initially conceived at a session for Yorkshire Funders held by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) in 2019. The motivation for it grew during the Covid pandemic, as the voluntary sector's role became more visible and in demand.

An initial taskforce was subsequently founded in 2021, led by a group of local funders from a broad range of organisations already connected with Yorkshire Funders, including community, family and corporate foundations.

It took the taskforce around a year to develop the CAF and find a suitable online platform.

Following this, an initial six-month pilot by three taskforce members was run in the summer of 2022. After receiving feedback from both sides of the grant relationship, the CAF was launched and the taskforce became the Aligned Working Network, responsible for reviewing and amending the CAF based on funder and recipient feedback.

Motivation to carry out these reviews has increased following ongoing discussions around the development of a common feedback form to offer similar support to both parties later on in the relationship.


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## **We're trying to do something good (CAF2, Voluntary Sector)**

To develop the CAF, the taskforce compared the existing application forms of its members to find commonalities. It then sought to understand the overlaps in the information funders were trying to obtain and to develop questions which would best help applicants provide this.

The result of "plenty of discussions... [and some] fairly ploddy sessions" (CAF3, Funding Sector) is a set of 39 questions intended to replace funders' existing processes for applying for financial support. Questions relate to an applicant's basic details, governance and financial standing, the proposed initiative and the overlap with the funder and its objectives. Some questions are free text with word limits, whilst others are tick-boxes. The CAF can be embedded into funders' systems using the online platform Jotform [8]. Jotform is free for funders up to a certain number of submissions, allowing them to filter and download applications received. The CAF has been designed to be accessible for users with a visual or reading impairment.

The CAF is customisable: funders are able to add their own logo (replacing that of Yorkshire Funders), to remove any or all of the final nine questions, to add organisation-specific questions and to make it available either online or via paper forms. In addition, whilst Yorkshire Funders recommends the CAF is used for grant applications up to £5000, funders are free to determine its financial limits.



There were a number of aspects regularly mentioned by participants as key to the taskforce's success.

### **(i) Committed individuals and organisations**

Central to the CAF's successful development was a taskforce of organisations committed to improving funding application processes. Participating organisations were willing and capable to contribute staff time and energy, and had the courage and vision to change the status quo.

**Particular individuals were very vocal, very passionate  
(CAF3, Funding Sector)**

**The people... who came on board... had similar thinking... progressive... know[...] a lot, been in the sector in grant giving or commissioning in some form for many decades... seen lots of different systems... willing to give [their] time  
(CAF2, Funding Sector)**

## **(ii) Individual cheerleaders**

Also critical for the CAF's creation was the leadership and energy provided by Carla Marshall, Yorkshire Funders' Coordinator (now Consultant) who is also the Trust Manager at the Sir George Martin Trust. She was seen as pivotal in encouraging members' involvement and moving the project forward, reflecting a desire to bring about change, rather than settling for the status quo or waiting for the perfect solution.

**It's one of those things that people had spoken about for a long time... but everybody felt like it's impossible & so the fact that Carla & the team just... did it is great... perfection is the enemy of getting it done**  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)

**Having [Carla] at the front is valuable because... [she] gives you an energy & a belief that you're doing something that's worthwhile**  
(CAF3, Funding Sector)

## **(iii) A willingness to make decisions and compromise**

Numerous taskforce members mentioned the challenge of reaching agreement around the structure of the CAF, the information it should seek to obtain and the questions it therefore should ask. Members discussed at length how to keep the CAF succinct and how to ensure clear, accessible language, whilst also adequate depth to ensure broad usage potential. For many, agreeing on a set of fixed questions demanded relinquishing part of their individual identity and agency, as well as a willingness to compromise.

**Barriers around... whether people were willing to give up some individuality to have an application form**  
(CAF2, Funding Sector)

**Each organisation in a sense had to give something up to find the commonality**  
(CAF3, Funding Sector)

**As a team... being willing to compromise & let some things go**  
(CAF5, Funding Sector)

#### **(iv) Practicalities**

The choice of Jotform as the online platform for the CAF was praised. Despite not being the most advanced technology, it was considered to be the right option since it was simple enough for everyone.

**JotForm... worked really well for somebody  
who had no idea what they were doing  
(CAF2, Voluntary Sector)**

Members also discussed but rejected the idea of applications to all funders being made via a common portal, as trialled by London Funders during the Covid pandemic. Whilst this option had benefits, it was seen as difficult and costly to implement practically and a possible threat to funder-nonprofit relationships over the longer-term.

**If it was a common application form in a  
common portal & they just filled it in once  
with their project & it went to all the  
funders... that would be even better  
(CAF5, Funding Sector)**

# How have funders responded?

Funders raised two particular concerns around the CAF.

Firstly, they were concerned it would prevent them from fulfilling their governance and grant allocation requirements.

**It might be restrictive to some charities... we don't use it for our higher value grant because we need that extra bit of information  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

**I asked recently why [certain funders are] not using it & they said there were some questions that just weren't giving what they needed  
(CAF1, Funding Sector)**

Secondly, funders were concerned that a strictly worded CAF would impact negatively on their relational way of working with nonprofits, as well as threaten their individual organisational identity.

**Barriers... the different processes that funders had & people being worried that they would lose their relationship [with applicants]... how would this fit in & would it make it less relational?  
(CAF2, Voluntary Sector)**

The CAF was seen as unsuitable for some funders (for example, Community Foundations, which have a wide range of funding stakeholders). In respect of others, however, the data showed how many responded to these concerns by personalising the CAF, extending its use beyond its original conception by the taskforce. Through amending the CAF in line with internal processes, requirements and style, funders sought to protect their relational ways of working and core identity.

**A lot of people who sent in applications... [are] retired volunteers on a community project. So you've got to pitch it so that they are comfortable filling it in... we offer them three options because we recognise that not everybody wants to do it that way... we don't want to put off anybody  
(CAF7, Funding Sector)**



All but one participant acknowledged and accepted the need for this fluid and flexible use of the CAF, recognising in particular how it reflected the reality of the funding sector's diversity and variety.

**[You] fast realise that you need flexibility for it to be usable... so encouraging funders not to make huge changes because then it's not common, but at the same time acknowledging that each funder is different & needs to adapt to it**  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)

**When we finished... it was 'This is a common application form, you cannot change this... within a few months [we] realised that was not going to work & could be putting people off, so [now] it's very much, 'Use this as the basis... but we understand you're going to have to tweak & add or edit the odd thing'**  
(CAF5, Funding Sector)

The personalisation undertaken by funders went beyond adding their individual logos to the CAF to include:

**(i) 'tweaking' the CAF to align it with their own systems or funding requirements**

**We did use the same form. We maybe asked one extra question... just some minor tweaks... the core pieces of information are in there & the extra governance pieces can vary slightly**  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)

**The funders that we work with are similar [& feel] they can make the form work for them even if they have some niche element to them**  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)

**They... seem very happy to tweak, which is really important**  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)



**(ii) using the CAF for different amounts and grants to those initially intended**

**The YCAF really was meant to be for £5000 grants & lower, but actually I find if we gave out seven or eight grand it does the same job as long as I'm [also] having a chat  
(CAF2, Funding Sector)**

**(iii) using the CAF as inspiration for alternative application processes or using it without reference to Yorkshire Funders or its communal nature**

**We stripped back everything that we did, not to mimic the form exactly, but certainly to take the inspiration from it  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

# What difference has the CAF made?

Participants' reactions to the CAF were positive, with interviewees on both sides of the funding relationship describing how it made the application process smoother and easier. In addition, some saw it as encouraging a stronger relationship between funders and nonprofits, as well as increased equality between nonprofits.

**Very smooth, very good feedback  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

**I think it's really good... it's marvellous... it does really work... this idea that [funders are] actively trying to shift those power dynamics & make a level playing field, not just between them & the nonprofits, but also between the nonprofits themselves  
(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)**

## **(i) Improves nonprofit communication and helps funder assessment**

The CAF's structure and questions enabled nonprofits to easily communicate relevant information: nonprofits described how they felt supported in knowing what to tell funders, and able to do so in a way which made it simple for them to understand. This was considered to be particularly beneficial for less well-resourced nonprofits, helping them to better represent themselves and levelling the playing field within the sector.

On the funders' side, funders appreciated how the CAF made it easier for them to compare applications with each other, a particular benefit for less experienced trustees.

**It's made it easier for people to complete & for us to get to a quicker decision because we're not getting pages & pages of information that we don't need... We get a lot of good feedback that the form is concise, quick & it asks for the right information  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

**Gives you the ability to talk about you & what you do or want to do... gives you the opportunity to present the things you think are most important or most interesting... I can imagine it might give more confidence  
(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)**

## **(ii) Increases funders' self-awareness, improving relationships with nonprofits**

The CAF also encouraged funders to reflect on their application processes and compare their approaches with other funders. Through drawing funders' attention to how they required nonprofits to apply for support, the CAF encouraged them to consider things from the nonprofits' point of view, as well as showed them how other funders approach applications. This was seen by some to positively shape how they were perceived by nonprofits.

**It makes the nonprofits think 'Oh, they are trying. They are bothered about our time & they actually care. They listen to us. They listen to our feedback'**  
(CAF2, Voluntary Sector)

**Just going through the process of reviewing our form, learning & hearing & seeing what other funders are including in their application forms has been a real benefit**  
(CAF5, Funding Sector)

## **Increasing the CAF's impact**

The data show clearly how the CAF is already having a positive impact on nonprofits' experiences of funding applications, its key original target. They also reveal how the CAF is of benefit for funders in respect of both their assessment of applications and perceptions of their attitude towards nonprofits.

Lacking, however, is evidence of the CAF being used by enough funders to enable nonprofits to reuse responses for multiple applications, a key target. Having nonprofits "find that they are being asked exactly the same questions, in the same format by more and more funders" [9], thereby saving them time and resources, is not yet a reality.

**I think it's really important that we get as many funders on board as possible, because if not, it doesn't work as well... it's not common... that's been the frustration... other people haven't got on board yet. It is taking a while to get out**  
(CAF1, Funding Sector)

**When [organisations] start to see a similar application form... then it will come into its own and it will be beneficial... but I think that it does need time for that to happen... it only really comes into its own if it's used more than once**  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)

[9] <https://www.yorkshirefunders.org.uk/resources>

Participants discussed how to respond to this challenge and increase the CAF's uptake in order to strengthen its positive impact on nonprofits. Unsurprisingly, this was seen to require wider active promotion of the form and its benefits. It was, however, also recognised as reliant upon funders agreeing to sufficiently align their application processes with the collective so as to make these recognisable and of benefit to nonprofits. Achieving such changes would require time and capacity, as well as buy-in from the right people within organisations.

**It's... somebody nationally feeling they take  
the ownership of it & everybody else ceasing  
what they're doing and supporting it  
(CAF7, Funding Sector)**

**Getting people to to adopt it has been  
hard & then having the capacity to  
promote it...  
(CAF5, Funding Sector)**

**I think they should have confidence in  
it & talk to more people about it  
(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)**

**Get[ting] more funders on board is definitely the way to do it... top  
down... letting people know that... we have this amazing product,  
have this amazing form... get more funders to adopt it & then  
community organisations will be 'Oh yeah, we've seen this form  
before & we filled it out before' but I guess that there is a time lag  
that needs to happen before the funders will adopt it  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)**

# Conclusion

**It's not perfect, but the fact that it's done is a massive step in the right direction  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)**

Both in theory and practice, the CAF was welcomed by participants from the funding and voluntary sectors. As a result of not only sufficient capacity and enthusiasm, but also a willingness to make compromises to achieve commonality, the taskforce was seen to have already succeeded in creating a set of questions which make it easier for nonprofits to apply for funding. The CAF has also shown itself to offer additional benefits, helping funders more easily assess applications and, in line with wider sectoral shifts, alerting funders to their relationships with nonprofits and the demands they place upon them.

The data showed how the use of the CAF in practice was marked by its personalisation by funders in order to ensure their internal requirements were met and to protect their relationships with nonprofits. Whilst funders' approaches to personalisation varied considerably in nature, the need to shift the CAF away from its initial format in line with funders' individual wishes in order to encourage take-up was accepted in principle by almost all participants.

**As the YCAF has evolved and more funders now use it, grant seekers may find that some funders who use the YCAF have a few more additional questions as their organisation has to have these. We believe that this is better than them using a completely different set of questions and format [7]**

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 this wider take-up was acknowledged as requiring resources, time and commitment. Reconciling the benefits the CAF could offer nonprofits in terms of simplicity, predictability and recognisability with the flexibility with which funders appear to want to use the CAF was, however, seen to pose a considerable additional challenge.

**That's what makes the funding world brilliant: it's so unique, each funder is different. But that's why it's so hard... To have one thought is really challenging**  
(CAF5, Funding Sector)

**The appetite is there to create something. The skill of creating something that will be adopted by everybody & the time and effort to do that, I wouldn't underestimate**  
(CAF7, Funding Sector)

There is therefore a tension between the opposing demands of funders and nonprofits. The more the CAF is diluted, the fewer its benefits to nonprofits in search of simplicity and speed, who will continue to have to fulfil different requirements for each funder. Funders appear, however, unwilling to use the CAF in a uniform manner., with those who have already adopted it preferring to personalise it to better fit their needs.

**You've got to be careful that... you don't end up with something that's so diluted that it's purposeless**  
(CAF3, Funding Sector)

**The funder is the one who needs to implement it, so that it's funder time being spent, it's not community organisation time**  
(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)

As is so often the case in funder-nonprofits relationships, this paradox reveals the power held by funders. It is their decisions about the extent of the alignment of their use of the CAF with other funders in terms of both format and content which both individually and collectively determine the ease with which nonprofits can apply for funding.

Encouraging the success of the CAF for nonprofits is therefore not just a simple 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 interests of nonprofits, as well as themselves. As such, the extent of the CAF's ultimate success depends upon the balance struck between effective commonality and adequate uptake.

The nature of this balance is not something which can be decided upon unilaterally, nor can it be forced upon the sector: doing so would not only be unfeasible practically, but would ignore the idiosyncrasies of funders, their trustees and their staff, as well as contradict the collaborative values at the heart of the CAF. Rather, 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.

**The more you speak to people, the more you see  
the value of making the changes that you're  
making. Whereas at the beginning, you're doing it  
for you & your workload & what works for you, the  
more we're networking, it's... 'Well, how can we  
make this better for everyone?  
(CAF8, Funding Sector)**

Logistics, capacity and the nature of the funding sector make this a considerable challenge. In addition, winning funders' hearts and minds may be difficult: the data reveal limited practical benefits to funders of working collectively besides obtaining an insight into what other organisations are doing, with the chief benefits for funders arising in relation to their individual use of the CAF. Nevertheless, in line with the underlying philosophy behind the CAF that progress, even if flawed, is better than staying still, these steps may still be worth considering.

**Buy-in from the individual, [from] all the organisations,  
[from] the leadership... of all those organisations... the  
goodwill of those funders... to try & share best practice  
& try and improve things as a collaborative... you can't  
really do that if you didn't have that  
(CAF2, Voluntary Sector)**

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.





# **Appendix One**

## **Funders currently using the CAF**

ASDA Foundation (used nationally)  
Craven Trust  
Easy Riding of Yorkshire Council  
Friends of St Monica's Hospital  
Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust  
Prosper Wakefield  
Sir George Martin Trust  
South Yorkshire's Community Foundation  
Stonehaven Charitable Trust  
Tarn Moor Estate  
Two Ridings Community Foundation  
Wellsprings Together  
Woodsmith Foundation

# Appendix Two

Participant Identifier	Sector	Focus	Grant size	Geographical region covered
CAF1	Funding Sector	Broad range of issues	Up to £10,000	Outside Yorkshire
CAF2	Funding Sector	Health-care related grants to local grassroots organisations	£2000-£5000	Mostly West Yorkshire
CAF3	Funding Sector	Grants focusing on poverty issues	Wide range	York
CAF4	Voluntary Sector	Project development and grant-funding for small organisations	NA	Any
CAF5	Funding Sector	General community support work	£1000-£5000	West Yorkshire
CAF6 and CAF7 (interviewed together)	Funding Sector	Small community and personal grants	Up to £1500	Specific area within Yorkshire
CAF8	Funding Sector	Grants supporting grassroots, low income groups tackling mental health, isolation and loneliness in communities	Up to £20,000	National
CAF9	Voluntary Sector	Minoritised communities	NA	Any

# The Common Application Form



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