

Top Tips For Completing Application Forms

This information sheet is based on the Fundraising Plus course *Funding Applications* and is designed to help you make better funding applications.

Application Forms

Application forms can seem very daunting, especially if you are new to writing funding applications. As a starting point, it helps to stop and think about the funder's point of view. What do funders need to know?

All funders share the desire to make a difference. They want their money to be used to greatest effect, to make real change to improve people's lives. All funders have a limited amount of money to distribute, and competition for their grants is growing. Somehow, funders need to make decisions about how best to distribute their funds. To do this, they need to know the following about your project:

- What organisation will be delivering this project
- That the organisation knows what it is doing – it has experience of similar work, or the people in the organisation have experience that is relevant
- That the organisation has the capacity to deliver this project
- That there is a genuine need for the project
- What the project will do
- That the people the project is for will use it
- That the project will make a real difference
- That the project will be good value for money

Almost every application form will ask questions about these points.

Some funders may have additional priorities, and will ask you extra things such as how people who will benefit from your project have been involved in planning it or will be involved in steering it; what support your project has from the wider community; or how your project works in partnership with other organisations.

There is no mystery to funding application forms. They are simply a communication tool.

Funders want to give you money. They need you to communicate effectively to help them do so.

What Happens To Your Application Form?

Most funders who use an application form will have some administration resource – this could be anything from one person working in their own home, to an office with lots of employees.

All funders have some kind of decision making body, commonly called a panel. This may be the trustees of a charitable trust, or it may be a group of people who have been recruited by a funding body. They could meet monthly, annually or any frequency in between.

Some funders make grants in rounds, with set deadlines for applications. Other funders have a “rolling programme” and applications are simply put forward to the next panel meeting. Even if they have a rolling programme, there will be a cut-off date by when you need to have your application in for it to be considered at the next panel meeting. This might be important if your project is time sensitive. Most funders will publish their timescales to help you plan.

Different funders create different systems to manage the applications they receive, according to the resources they have. Generally, only the larger funders have the capacity to contact you about any missing or unclear information in your application. Increasingly, funders are adopting a two-stage application to save you and them time and effort. More and more funders are using online application forms which create their own particular problems.

Your application form will be read and probably photocopied several times. Initially by someone who will be checking it is complete and eligible. Possibly then by someone doing a formal assessment, perhaps allocating scores against the funder’s criteria and possibly making a recommendation to the decision making panel (and they may or may not contact you during this assessment process). Finally, by the panel who may also use a scoring system in a meeting.

So you are communicating with a variety of people when you fill in your form. Some of them might have a good understanding of the kind of work you do, some might not. Some of them will have more time to devote to reading your application than others. All of them will have a pile of other applications to read as well as yours.

Make Your Application Stand Out

The following tips have been created with participants on the Fundraising Plus *Application Forms* courses:

- **Read The Guidance:** Highlight any key points you need to take account of – i.e. eligibility; any exclusions; deadlines; timescales; funders’ priorities; eligible items to be included in the budget; who needs to sign your application; and of course, any

instructions on answering their questions. A concern often raised by funders is that applicants just don't seem to read their guidance and applications fail as a result.

- **Good Planning:** If you've done your research, and thought everything through, your planning will show, and your application will be stronger.
- **Use Plain English:** Fancy, flowery language – whether academic or professional – only acts as a barrier, not an aid to communication. Use plain English, short sentences, and ordinary language. Explain any specialist language you use. If English is not your first language, don't worry – your application will be more credible if you write it in imperfect English than if a native English speaker writes it for you.
- **Sometimes Less Is More:** Three clear sentences are better than half a page of confusing waffle.
- **Take Your Time:** Rushed applications appear rushed. Rushing results in careless mistakes, which can call into question your planning and research. You know that most funders have set deadlines, or need a minimum amount of time to process your application, so you **must** plan ahead.
- **Cut & Paste:** If you're using an online application form, try drafting your answers in your own word processor first, and cut and paste into the form when you're finished. Sometimes this will allow you to include formatting such as bullets making your answers easier to read. And watch the word count!
- **Make It Easy For The Panel:** Headings, short paragraphs and bullet points, with lots of white space are easier to read. Avoid lots of dense small text, and never use bold except for headings. Use the up to date form – the panel will be used to the layout and appearance of the form – if you don't use it, they will have to work harder to find the information they need. If you have a problem with the form (e.g. you don't have compatible software) contact the funder and ask them what to do.
- **Answer All The Questions:** If you want it to be considered, put it in the form. "See attached sheet" should only be used for additional detail, not key information, and only if supplementary information is accepted. Don't skip questions – if there is something you can't answer, explain it.
- **Follow A Thread:** The need you describe, the activities or services your project will deliver, the outcomes that you will create, and the items in your budget must all thread together.
- **Proof Read it:** Your application might not fail because of mistakes and errors, but these can contribute to an impression of poor planning, and might lead to another application just having the edge over yours!
- **Check Your Budget:** Make sure your budget supports your activities – no odd items that bear no obvious relation to your project; make sure it is well researched and adds up! Ask for what you need. But make sure you're not asking for more money than the funder will give. If you're asking for a contribution to a larger project explain that. A well thought out budget shows good planning.

- **Get It Signed:** Commonly funders will expect a trustee or committee member of your group to be at least one of the signatories. This is crucial; they are checking that your trustees are properly in control of the organisation. So book them in well in advance to avoid a rush as the deadline approaches.

Planning Your Application

The process of planning your application begins long before you put pen to paper. The strongest applications are for projects that are based on genuine need and thorough research, not projects created to take advantage of a funding stream that's come up.

Ideally, your organisation constantly monitors what it does and what people need. So there should be little extra research needed for a funding application. In reality we know that often, the research only happens as part of the preparation for a funding application. Even so, it should start before you have fixed on a funder to apply to.

Your trustees are responsible for the organisation's strategic management, so it is their decision to go ahead and seek funding. Later, they will also need to approve any applications that are made.

Before you apply to any funder, check the timescales and draw up a timetable like the one below for yourself.

Start writing application	Final draft of application is completed	Completed application is approved and signed by trustees	Final date for posting to ensure deadline is met	Deadline for applications to be received by	Panel Awards Grant	Grant is paid	Project starts
←→		←→	←→	←→	←→	←→	
This could take anything from a couple of hours to a few weeks depending on the complexity of the application, the time available to work on it and who needs to be involved. And you need to be gathering all the supporting documents together now, not waiting till the submission date.		You should aim for this date for your final draft, even if it is a long time before the funder's deadline.	Even if by email or online, allow a day or two in case of problems. If by post, allow a few days to be safe.	This is very probably at least a couple of weeks after the deadline, possibly longer for some grants.	This might be quite soon after the decision, but it might be weeks later especially if there is further administration to deal with, or the funder has a high volume of applications.		
← This whole process will take at least 6 weeks and could take several months. →							