

Learning Report: Prepared for Friends Provident Foundation

Compiled by Gemma Bull and Tom Steinberg, Modern Grantmaking, 28 October 2025

Table of Contents

1. Summary of Recommendations	2
2. Background and Main Aims of this Report	4
3. Methodology and Limitations	5
4.1. External Stakeholders	6
4.2. Internal Stakeholders	12
5. Conclusion and Recommendations	20

1. Summary of Recommendations

In summer 2025 Friends Provident Foundation (FPF) sought external support to deliver a learning report that would help the foundation to understand the consequences of it testing a new approach to developing funding applications as part of its Transforming Financial Systems programme.

Modern Grantmaking was commissioned to deliver this project. Below we outline the overall conclusion and key recommendations relating to this work:

- 1. FPF should continue to seek feedback from more existing applicants and future grantees about their experiences of the entire TFS process** and whether being involved in this process has saved them any time compared to being involved in other funding processes. Securing more feedback from a larger pool of people will enable FPF to understand whether early results develop into broader trends, or not.
- 2. When it has a larger feedback data set, FPF should segment the data to understand whether different types of applicants are experiencing benefits from the new process.** For example, in future, FPF may learn that smaller-sized organisations believe that this kind of process improves accessibility and saves them time whereas larger, more established organisations do not. FPF could then consider and decide whether it values standardisation to improve accessibility for all over offering different application processes for different types of organisations that may suit these organisations better but would undermine standardisation.
- 3. If FPF continues to run a funding process similar to this one in future, it should over-communicate internally and externally why it has decided to work in this way** and develop easy to read materials that outline how each step in the process has been purposely designed to try and meet specific aims e.g. improved accessibility.
- 4. FPF should a.) develop a 'user journey map' for any new funding process.** This is not an internal process diagram but a tool that helps funders to experience the steps of its process from the perspective of an applicant or grantee.

5. **FPF should then b.) use this map to help it to identify parts of the funding process that may be more confusing or difficult for different types of applicants.** Following this, FPF could prioritise a reasonable and realistic number of process improvements.
6. **FPF should co-design any new funding programme criteria, application template and assessment review template with key users e.g. internal and external stakeholders,** as relevant, to help ensure greater alignment between various parts of the funding process in future. In practice, this could mean doing things like testing explanations of the process steps of a funding programme and materials such as application with external users to get their feedback.
7. **If FPF wants to assess funding applications partly based on how applicants express a theory of change for their work then FPF needs to provide more support at the pre-application stage for applicants to learn about this concept** and to use this tool, before they are required to develop a funding application.
8. Finally, **FPF should conduct a review of its various technology systems used during the funding process** with the aim of developing and implementing a realistic action plan solely focused on enabling the most important changes before any new funding programme is launched.

2. Background and Main Aims of this Report

Friends Provident Foundation (FPF) is an independent charity that makes grants and uses its endowment towards a fair and sustainable economic system that serves people and the planet. FPF connects, funds, supports and invests in new thinking to shape a future economy that works for all. The foundation strives to work with applicants and grantees in a relational way.

In summer 2025 Friends Provident Foundation sought external support to deliver a learning report that would help the foundation to understand the consequences of it testing a new approach to developing funding applications as part of its Transforming Financial Systems (TFS) programme.

This new approach was centred on using a conversation-based first stage application process, replacing the need for prospective grantees to write their own funding applications. In practice, this meant that once a potential applicant had been deemed eligible to apply for the Transforming Financial Systems programme, FPF would meet with an applicant to learn more about their organisation and idea that requires funding.

If FPF felt that an applicant's idea could be a good fit for the TFS programme, and with an applicant's explicit permission, FPF would then develop a draft funding application on an applicant's behalf and share it with the applicant for approval. Once an application was approved by the applicant, FPF would submit it on the applicant's behalf.

FPF chose to test this new approach to developing funding applications based on previous feedback it received from applicants, which highlighted that:

- Some applicants struggle to find sufficient time to create multiple bespoke funding applications for different funders simultaneously.
- Some applicants find it easier to develop written funding applications than others.

FPF wanted to trial this new process in an attempt to ease the burden on applicants and to improve accessibility by ensuring a more 'level playing field' because funding applications would be drafted and submitted by FPF in a more standardised manner.

FPF commissioned Modern Grantmaking to deliver a learning report that would:

- Analyse various pieces of research to identify any key learning concerning internal and external stakeholders' experiences of using this new approach.
- Based on this analysis, provide recommendations about how FPF could implement this learning in future.

3. Methodology and Limitations

The methodology selected was primarily qualitative analysis. In order to produce this report, we reviewed and analysed the following research:

- FPF commissioned a third-party consultancy, Lucent, to design and run an anonymous online survey to gather feedback from potential applicants and applicants about the new funding approach.
- Feedback provided by Programme Advisory Group (PAG) members. The PAG is a group of volunteers who support the foundation's grant-making activities, including making funding decisions in relation to the Transforming Financial Systems (TFS) programme. FPF conducted an anonymous online survey to gather feedback on the new approach from this group.
- Modern Grantmaking ran a 'learning retrospective' with FPF team members; specifically the two staff that had been most involved in designing and running the new funding process. During this retrospective, team members were supported and challenged to identify what went well, what could be improved and what they have learned from this new approach.

Limitations: Throughout this report we seek to note when findings are based on multiple sources of data and information and are – from our perspective – more robust and reliable. At the same time, we also express caution throughout the report when findings are based on small sample sizes and comparatively less robust information. We also note that the qualitative methods primarily used to help develop this report aggregate in many cases the perceptions of individuals that are not objective truths but subjective viewpoints. This is a general feature of qualitative methods in social sciences, which is compensated for through the use of multiple data sources and aforementioned triangulation.

Finally, in addition to being commissioned to develop this learning report, Modern Grantmaking was also commissioned to hold several initial conversations with potential applicants and to draft several funding applications on behalf of applicants. This means that we also took part in aspects of testing this new funding approach. As such, we have decided not to include any of our own views as part of this report in terms of our experience of being involved in part of the funding process, and instead to focus on research and analysis only involving stakeholders internal to FPF, potential applicants and applicants (that submitted funding applications).

4. Key Findings

The following section provides information on key findings developed after analysing the research described above in Section 3.

4.1. External Stakeholders

Anonymous applicant feedback survey conducted by Lucent

In summer 2025, FPF commissioned an external consultancy, Lucent, to design and run an anonymous feedback survey that aimed to capture applicants' views on the new process being tested as part of the TFS programme. Lucent completed this work in July 2025. This feedback survey represents the only piece of external research conducted to date in relation to the new process being tested as part of the TFS programme.

Twenty-four applicants submitted anonymous responses to this survey. This represented a 24% response rate (as the survey was sent to 102 people). nfpResearch, another consultancy that runs similar surveys, typically finds that the response rate for unsuccessful applicants is 15%.

It is important to note that when they were asked to complete the survey to share their experiences of the TFS programme, only some respondents were aware that their funding application would not be progressed - those that were not asked to proceed beyond the first step of completing a 'Say Hello' form. Eight respondents submitted funding applications but at the point of completing the survey, they would have been unaware of whether their funding application was going to be ultimately successful, or not.

Ten respondents to the survey said that they had only engaged with the first step of the TFS programme, which was to complete an online 'Say Hello' form or a high-level expression of interest form. On reviewing the 'Say Hello' form, FPF would only invite those applicants to meet if the foundation felt that they were both eligible and had described an idea that represented a potential good fit for the funding priorities of the TFS programme. Lucent segmented the responses of respondents who did not progress beyond the 'Say Hello' stage and those that did. Below we also highlight the difference in responses between those that did not progress past this stage of the process and those that did.

Survey respondents were asked to rate how they felt about the overall process on a scale of 1-5. The average score across twenty-two respondents was 4.1 out of 5. However, when the data was segmented, those that only submitted a 'Say Hello' form gave a rating of 3.6, while those that progressed further rated the process 4.6. These ratings follow a broader trend across applicant and grantee feedback surveys run by trusts and foundations, which typically show that those that proceed further along a funding process tend to score a process more favourably. Therefore, we suggest that the most useful learning in terms of this survey can be derived from the subsequent questions asked.

Fifteen out of twenty-four respondents answered the question "What aspects [of the programme] did you like?" Respondents were given a multiple-choice list of words to select from, of which 'speed' was one. Six out of the fifteen respondents said that they liked the 'speed' of the programme.

As we do not have access to the full data set relating to this survey, it is not possible to attempt to triangulate responses to this question with all the free-text responses provided by applicants relating to this same question. Therefore, it is difficult to determine precisely what people liked about the new process when they chose to select 'speed'. 'Speed' in this context could relate to several things, such as respondents felt that the steps in the process went at a pace that suited them (e.g. the process did not feel too slow) and/or that they received a timely steer from FPF about whether they could or could not proceed further along the process.

Three respondents chose that they liked the 'convenience' and 'simplicity' of the process. Another three provided 'other' as a response with one stating that the process enabled them to "actually explain the idea."

One respondent provided the following free-text quote, *“I think that this is the best application process I've encountered yet; it's transparent, helps us avoid communicating in a way we seem to used to, but which funders may not get, by removing the onus of the writeup from us, and building it from an approachable chat. I don't have anything to improve because I believe this should become the industry standard!”*

When reviewing the responses concerning less popular aspects of the new process, views were more mixed (although only seven out of twenty-four people completed this question). One person chose 'slow' as a negative aspect of their experience. Again, we do not have access to the full set of free-text answers shared by respondents so are unable to fully determine whether this respondent believed that the process overall was too slow and/or that they felt that they received information about next steps from FPF in a way that they perceived to be too slow.

One person selected 'complicated' whereas five other respondents chose 'other' as a category. Here, another person selected 'speed', in the context of a swift rejection (meaning FPF had not asked them to proceed to the stage of meeting) to show that their experience of 'speed' had been a negative one. Another said via a free-text quote that, *“it was not clear from the say hello form that this would be our final point of contact. It would have been helpful to actually speak to someone, as I think our project actually aligns with the aims of the fund. We aren't sure why the board felt it didn't.”*

In its final report, Lucent shared some example quotes from respondents that chose 'other'. One person said that they were not clear about the criteria FPF was using to determine whether to invite people to meet when reviewing the 'Say Hello' form. Another said that the online meeting designed to enable both the applicant and the foundation to learn more *“felt more like a verbal exam...with a set of pre-set questions.”* The same respondent also said that as the interview was *“conducted by a third-party consultant, it also felt that some background knowledge of the sector or the issues may have been missing.”*

Another respondent stated that, *“We felt the need to prepare quite thoroughly in advance - effectively writing out our answers and preparing a pitch...In practice, this didn't save much time or effort compared to a written application, and may have increased ambiguity or pressure for some applicants.”*

Seven respondents provided answers to the question, 'Was this an improvement on previous applications to FPF?'. Lucent did not segment answers to this question as doing so may have compromised anonymity. Five people answered 'yes' to this question with one person answering 'no' and one person answering 'unsure'.

Out of thirteen respondents, two people said that the process could have been improved in relation to the 'Say Hello' form. Three people said it could have been improved at the informal chat stage with three further people saying it could have been improved at the scheduling a call stage. One person said the writing of the funding application stage could have been improved.

Six people selected 'other' as a response. Again, here, at least two people said that FPF could be clearer about its funding priorities. One person said that they would have appreciated *"more direction on to what extent we can edit the funding application."* Two other respondents commented on the informal chat or meeting between applicants and FPF/third-party consultants. One person said they would have preferred greater clarity on *"...how things would unfold and the importance of the verbal meeting in shaping the outcome."* Another said, *"If the process is framed as informal and low-preparation, the interview should reflect that tone. Allowing more space for back-and-forth, clarification and discussion."*

Respondents were asked to share whether taking part in this new process saved their organisation any time. A couple of people said it was too early to tell. Five people estimated that taking part had saved their organisation <0.5 days' worth of work. Two people said one day. Two people said 1.5 days. One person said 2.5 days. One other said 3 days and another said 10 days, which they said equated to a saving in monetary terms of £8k. Given that one of the main aims of testing this new process was to help applicants save time with regards to drafting and submitting funding applications, these early estimates (albeit from a small sample size) suggest that running an application process in this way can help some applicants to save time on related activities.

As the TFS programme progresses, we would encourage FPF to gather more data from more applicants and future grantees to increase the size of this sample and to make it possible to segment data relating to estimated time savings according to certain applicant characteristics, for example, size of organisation, number of paid

staff and volunteers etc. Doing so could better help FPF to understand whether this kind of funding process generally helps to save applicants time and/or whether it helps only some applicants to save time (and whether this matters in terms of FPF's values and overall mission/vision).

Overall and in summary (of the Lucent anonymous applicant feedback survey), there was some consensus on the areas that FPF could work to improve in future. These areas were:

- Providing greater clarity about the various steps in the process including the specific purpose of each of these. For example, the purpose of the Say Hello form could be explained versus the informal chat, and what applicants could expect back from FPF once each step was complete. For instance, some potential applicants that completed Say Hello forms did not understand that FPF would review these and make a judgement about whether to invite them to the next stage of the process, or not.
- In terms of the informal chat or meeting stage of the process, FPF staff and third-party consultants were expected to use a pre-agreed template to both provide further information to applicants about why FPF had decided to test this new process, what the process would involve including the use of a standardised set of questions as part of this meeting alongside key next steps and timelines. Applicants who took part in informal chats were informed that FPF had agreed on some process standardisation such as set questions with the aim of 'levelling the playing field'. However, FPF staff and third-party consultants were free to ask follow-up prompts, as and when needed. Some applicant feedback from the anonymised survey indicates that there was a tension between implementing standardisation and the informal chats feeling more formal and less bespoke to the individual applicant, their idea and their context. In hindsight, this tension may have been inevitable given that FPF required some level of standardisation in the process to try and deliver on its goal of improved accessibility. Naming the informal chats as 'pre-application conversations' or equivalent and/or providing more explicit information about expectations in advance may have helped applicants better understand the purpose of these meetings. Although, we recognise the difficulty here for FPF because these chats were also designed to help the foundation to better determine whether an applicant should be invited to develop an application. Not all organisations invited to take part in these meetings were guaranteed to

be invited to complete a funding application. Therefore, naming these meetings 'first stage application chats' would also not have been appropriate.

- Some survey respondents said that the informal chats did not feel particularly informal because in practice, applicants were asked a set of questions.
- Together, the use of a standardised set of questions, asked by FPF staff or third-party consultants, for some applicants, seemed to a.) be inconsistent with how these meetings were previously framed by FPF and b.) perpetuated a common power dynamic inherent in grantmaking in which an applicant feels that they are serving the representative of the funder that is counter to any notion of both parties having a genuinely two-way conversation.
- One survey respondent mentioned that they were unclear about how much they could edit their funding application. FPF had articulated internally that its preference was for staff and third-party consultants to write a full draft of any funding application and for applicants to be informed that in order to save them time; they should only suggest very important changes to the draft e.g. to correct mistakes or to include additional key information. Bar this one response, it is not clear from other survey respondent feedback to what extent they felt that FPF's preferences were communicated clearly to them, also including the foundation's desire to only receive funding applications that were four pages long or less.
- One respondent commented on the use of third-party consultants in terms of these individuals not necessarily having as much thematic knowledge relating to the TFS programme context when compared to applicants or FPF staff. FPF had decided to use third-party consultants to conduct some informal chat/meetings with applicants to ensure that it had enough capacity to support applicants. Perhaps, in future, FPF could consider utilising third-party consultants, if needed, that have both grantmaking and thematic knowledge and experience. However, we would share one final note of caution here; FPF should consider conducting further research with TFS programme applicants and future grantees to determine whether this feedback was only shared by one applicant or whether it represents a broader trend.

4.2. Internal Stakeholders

The following section provides information on key findings developed after analysing research involving stakeholders internal to FPF about their experiences of the new funding process.

Programme Advisory Group (PAG) Feedback

In June 2025, FPF team members asked members of the PAG to complete an anonymous online survey to share their views on the new funding process so far. Four out of six members completed this survey.

In answer to the question, ‘How did the process of reading and understanding the applications feel?’, one PAG member rated their experience as 5 out of 5. Two members rated their experiences as 4 out of 5, while one rated it as 3 out of 5.

Three out of four people provided free-text answers to supplement their answers. The person that rated their response a 5 simply shared that they felt this part of the process was “straightforward”. One person that rated their response a 4 said that they would have preferred “...a closer correlation between the form of applications in the way they are written up, and the criteria we are trying to assess against”.

The person that rated their response a 3 said, *“My main feedback is that it was difficult to compare the proposals. It would be helpful to be provided with all the information in one editable document (the proposals, the criteria) and to be given a means of ranking. For example, we could get allocated 50 points, which we can spread across the various proposals according to how we rate them. That would make it easy to pick out the best proposals and order them into a “top 5” etc during the feedback session. I think the criteria should be simplified as we are not a decision-making group. I felt like the most useful prompts were those along the lines of “are you excited about this proposal / do you feel it has promise?” and “do you see any barriers to implementation / have major objections?”. I felt like I could eliminate several applications because they would not have a transformative impact...”*

When asked if they felt whether applications were sufficiently different from each other, three out of four respondents said that they felt that applications were 'very distinct'.

One person said that they felt 'many applications were too similar'. They provided further information regarding their answer via a free-text comment, *"The support now provided by FPF means the variation in quality of application has been flattened. The writing, structure and content is of a standard - so this should in time make decisions on quality of project easier (*but we are not there yet as almost all applications in this round stopped short of telling us what they would actually 'do')."*

Three respondents said that they felt that they gained a clear sense of most of the applying organisations. One person said this was the case only for some, further stating that, *"Since the orgs did not write the application summaries I feel that I did lose a sense of identity, voice etc."*

In rating the clarity and understandability of the applications, two out of four respondents said that the applications were 'very clear and easy to understand'. Two respondents said that the applications were 'mostly clear with some confusing elements'. One person who said that the proposals were very clear and easy to understand also said that they would have been eager to see a more clear understanding of applicants' theory of change. One person who said that applications were mostly clear with some confusing elements also shared that they were, *"Baffled by the lack of specifics on what an organisation plans to do. There are too many general descriptions of 'urgent issues', 'organisation track record' and too few details on 'if we got the money, we would do this and this - which would deliver this for these people - and we'd measure the success of it this way'. It's all too woolly in my view."*

In terms of workload, two people said that the process was 'very reasonable' and two others said that it was 'somewhat reasonable'. Three members said that it took them less than fifteen minutes to review an application with one person saying it took them between fifteen and thirty minutes.

In answer to the question, 'Did the application format provide you with the information needed to offer constructive feedback?', two members responded 'mostly yes' and two members responded 'somewhat'.

One person that answered ‘mostly yes’ also said, *“I would have liked to have had something from the applicants directly. I found it unclear as to whether we should be taking the budget into consideration.”* One person that answered ‘somewhat’ said, *“More consistent approach to quantifying outcomes” and “return on investment.”*

Two respondents said that the application review framework was ‘somewhat effective’ while another two said that it was ‘somewhat ineffective’. For one person who said the review framework was ‘somewhat ineffective’, they suggested that a clearer alignment between the application format and the assessment criteria would help.

One person who said that the review framework was ‘somewhat effective’ also said, *“I think we need a dedicated section on the project(s) to be enabled by the funding. I get some of this is core for organisations we 'like', because they're aligned with our strategic mission... but it feels like the purpose of the revamped approach was to stop this, invite new / different organisations with a clear delivery element to be encouraged to apply, and it didn't feel like that to me. In truth, I want radical action, genuinely new approaches / innovations because transforming the financial system is critical for people and planet. Most of the applications in this round felt like tinkering at the margins by organisations who are fully mainstream. It was a bit disappointing, given all the effort FPF have put in to make this better. I think in time, as the new system / framework is better known, this will improve.”*

All four respondents said that the PAG application assessment meeting was ‘very positive’ with all members stating that they felt that their expertise and views were ‘always’ or mostly heard during the meeting.

FPF Team Member Feedback

We designed and ran a ‘learning retrospective’ with the two members of the FPF team most involved in delivering the new funding process - Abigail Gibson, Head of Funding Strategy, and Kate Rudd, Funding Programme Officer. The retrospective took place on 6 August 2025.

The aims of the 'learning retrospective' were to support FPF team members to:

1. Reflect on the funding process.
2. Analyse what went well or what could have gone better, and why, using data sources available.
3. Plan on how to implement learning to make improvements in future.

In advance of and during the retrospective, team members were asked to consider various question prompts relating to 'What happened?', 'What did we learn?' and 'What should we start or stop doing?'. Below we include the main findings relating to these three parts of the retrospective.

a.) 'What happened?'

- **Previous internal learning influenced the design of the new process:** There was a frustration in the previous funding programme run by FPF that while initial chats with applicants were exciting, by the time they became written proposals they were not strong enough and got dismissed by the funding panel.
- **The new process was also shaped by learning from other funders:** Team members researched the funding processes run by other trusts and foundations that also appeared to value accessibility, equity and more relational ways of working.
- **The new process was purposely designed to enable quicker earlier decisions:** The 'Say Hello' stage was included to provide a point earlier along in the process for FPF to confirm whether applicants would be able to progress or not. The hope was that FPF could help some potential applicants to save time by letting them know that their organisation and/or idea was not suitable for the TFS programme before they spent hours developing a written proposal. However, FPF also decided to include the informal chat stage once the programme had launched to try and tackle the issue of when applicants completed the 'Say Hello' form but FPF felt that the information provided was not clear enough. This change to the process while the programme was running made it harder to manage applicant expectations at times.
- **Level of demand for funding:** FPF received more interest in the TFS programme than they expected, receiving 120 'Say Hello' forms. FPF decided to bring in third-party consultancy support to help meet this demand, although team members have some concerns that spending so much time on the front end of

the process could have knock-on consequences in terms of reduced capacity available for the grant management stage (if FPF continues to run more than one funding programme simultaneously).

b.) 'What did we learn?'

- **FPF needs to continue to improve the clarity and transparency of its external communications:** Team members felt that they worked hard to build clarity at the start but learned as the programme progressed that it was necessary to make changes in real time to improve its communications e.g. by updating its funding exclusions list and information on its website.
- **Funding priorities of the TFS programme were too broad:** In particular, policy and regulation. Team members recognised that this led to some confusion among applicants about whether and how much of a fit their idea may be. Team members recognised that they need another way to easily discover if an applicant is a good fit or not in future.
- **Challenges with the 'Say Hello' form:** The template used only partly helped applicants to explain how their work met the goals and criteria of the TFS programme. Team members found it difficult to strike the right balance when designing this template to ensure it was not too vague but also not too burdensome for applicants to complete. Team members reflected on whether adding a new short eligibility quiz stage to its future funding process could help applicants to better understand immediately if they were eligible or not.
- **Challenges with saying 'no':** Team members understood that part of running a grantmaking process often involves rejecting applicants. The challenge here mainly related to team members finding it difficult to disengage at certain parts of the process e.g. the informal chat stage due to the way in which it had been designed e.g. if it transpires that an applicant or their idea is actually not suitable for the programme, team members were initially expected to end the informal chat so as to not waste anyone's time. This was not really possible to do in practice when FPF also wanted to demonstrate that it valued relational working.
- **The value of relational working:** The new process was designed to enable FPF team members and eligible applicants to meet and to discuss the TFS

programme's goals as well as an applicant's idea in more depth. Team members said that working in such a relational way had led to the following benefits:

- ❖ In some instances, the informal chat stage enabled FPF to ask the applicant specific questions which led to the applicant saying that this part of the process helped them to strengthen their idea.
 - ❖ A couple of applicants told FPF staff that the informal chat stage helped to improve their confidence.
 - ❖ Some applicants expressed how much they valued talking to a real person, reflecting that it's more common *not* to speak to someone working for a funder during pre-application and application stages.
 - ❖ Having a good understanding about applicants and their ideas meant that FPF was in a better position to provide feedback to applicants (especially those who had been rejected).
- **Theory of Change is not a term or tool used by all applicants:** Some applicants were not used to the concept of a Theory of Change and did not use the same language or tool in their own work. During the informal chat meetings, in these cases, FPF tried to work with applicants in other ways to help them to talk about the intended impact of their work.
 - **The process helped FPF to make connections between and across projects:** Team members said that having a deeper understanding of applicants and their ideas enabled them to recognise connections between organisations, to improve their sector knowledge and to recognise when an applicant may not be suitable for a grant but may be suitable for something else like social investment.
 - **Some sense of the process having helped to improve accessibility:** FPF team members felt that the process “had been more equalising, but maybe not as much as they had hoped”. If invited to meet, applicants still had to prepare for the informal chats and have the confidence to talk about their organisation and idea in-depth.
 - **Some misalignment with the PAG on the aims of the new process and how the design of the new process reflected these aims:** Team members were very clear about the two main aims of the new process: to improve accessibility for applicants and to ease the burden of applicants when it comes to completing

funding applications. Team members felt that it was a positive thing that PAG members could not ‘hear the applicant’s voice’ because they had purposely designed the process so that applications would be more standardised, whereas some PAG members felt that this was a negative thing. Team members also felt that their views relating to the applications recommendation for stage one assessment were not always valued when it came to decision-making.

c.) ‘What should we start or stop doing?’

- **Consider stopping the TFS programme being run on a rolling basis:** The team felt that there was not enough capacity to optimally run and to also reflect on the new process well on an ongoing basis as demand continued to increase. Team members recommended a month’s closure between each funding round to enable a proper review period and planning for stage two.
- **Improve and integrate technology:** Team members identified numerous technology-related issues, including a lack of dedicated internal technology support, lack of integration between FPF’s contact management system, diary booking system, online meeting platform and the chosen AI transcription service. A lack of general integration and automation increased the potential for manual error.
- **Keep having empathy for applicants:** Team members emphasised that it is possible to work in a relational way and have empathy for applications while setting clear expectations.

Advice to other funders considering similar funding approaches

The FPF team shared three pieces of advice for any funders considering trialling a similar funding approach:

1. Ensure you have sufficient resources to run this kind of relational process. Resources include staff time to have calls with applicants and to let applicants know that FPF will not be progressing their idea any further, for example. They also include potential training for staff to support them to have appropriate conversations.

2. Enable objective critique of the process e.g. consider third-party research to gather feedback on applicants or grantees' experiences.
3. Have a clear sense of what you are looking to fund, and why. This will require a strong intellectual framework that you can easily reflect as part of your application and assessment processes.

Areas for potential improvement

Overall and in summary, there was some consensus between internal stakeholders on the areas that FPF could work to improve in future in relation to its funding processes. These areas were:

- Theory of change: Both team members and PAG members said that it was hard to understand some applicants' theory of change for their work.
- Aligning application template design with the assessment review framework: Both groups of internal stakeholders recognised that this had been a challenge.

There were also some notable differences in feedback between FPF team members and the PAG members that completed the anonymous online survey. These differences were:

- PAG members expressed that their expertise and views were always or mostly heard and valued during the PAG assessment meeting, whereas team members felt that their expertise and views were not always heard and valued in the same meeting.
- One PAG member criticised the standardisation of applications in terms of finding it hard to get a sense of an applicant's individual voice. FPF members felt that this was a purposeful and positive consequence of the new process.

Finally, we identified some similarities between external *and* internal stakeholder feedback on the new process:

- A need for greater clarity and transparency about why a funding process has been designed in a certain way and the related purpose of each stage in the process.
- A need for better alignment between funding programme criteria, application template design and the assessment review framework used to make funding decisions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

FPF chose to test this new approach to developing funding applications in an attempt to further two goals:

- To ease the burden on applicants that struggle to find sufficient time to create multiple bespoke funding applications for different funders, and;
- To improve accessibility of the funding process, recognising that some applicants find it easier to complete written funding applications than others.

There is some external learning from multiple applicants to suggest that the new process has helped them to save time in terms of their funding applications. There is also some external learning from multiple applicants, which indicates that some found this new process preferable to other funding processes, based on a number of things such as 'speed', 'convenience' and a more relational funder approach.

There is some internal learning to suggest that some applicants told FPF team members that they found parts of the new process more accessible e.g. the informal chat stage. There is also internal learning from team members and the PAG which demonstrates that funding applications were developed in a more standardised way. Overall, learning to date regarding the new process provides some encouraging signs that the new process is helping to contribute towards these two goals. However, the sample size for the external research involving applicants was small and applicants that provided feedback, at that point, were only part way through the funding process. Therefore, we want to sound a note of caution about overinterpreting these initial key findings and instead share related recommendations to FPF for further consideration about how it could continue to research the consequences of this new approach and implement learning to improve its funding offer.

Modern Grantmaking Recommendations:

- FPF should continue to seek feedback from more existing applicants and future grantees about their experiences of the entire TFS process and whether being involved in this process has saved them any time compared to being involved in other funding processes. Securing more feedback from a larger pool of people will enable FPF to understand whether early results develop into broader trends, or not.

- When it has a larger feedback data set, FPF should segment the data to understand whether different types of applicants are experiencing benefits from the new process. For example, in future, FPF may learn that smaller-sized organisations believe that this kind of process improves accessibility and saves them time whereas larger, more established organisations do not. FPF could then consider and decide whether it values standardisation to improve accessibility for all over offering different application processes for different types of organisations that may suit these organisations better but would undermine standardisation.
- If FPF continues to run a funding process similar to this one in future, it should over-communicate internally and externally why it has decided to work in this way and develop easy to read materials that outline how each step in the process has been purposely designed to try and meet specific aims e.g. improved accessibility.
- FPF should a.) develop a ‘user journey map’ for any new funding process. This is not an internal process diagram but a tool that helps funders to experience the steps of its process from the perspective of an applicant or grantee.
- FPF should then b.) use this map to help it to identify parts of the funding process that may be more confusing or difficult for different types of applicants. Following this, FPF could prioritise a reasonable and realistic number of process improvements.
- FPF should co-design any new funding programme criteria, application template and assessment review template with key users e.g. internal and external stakeholders, as relevant, to help ensure greater alignment between various parts of the funding process in future. In practice, this could mean doing things like testing explanations of the process steps of a funding programme and materials such as application with external users to get their feedback.
- If FPF wants to assess funding applications partly based on how applicants express a theory of change for their work then FPF needs to provide more support at the pre-application stage for applicants to learn about this concept and to use this tool, before they are required to develop a funding application.
- Finally, FPF should conduct a review of its various technology systems used during the funding process with the aim of developing and implementing a realistic action plan solely focused on enabling the most important changes before any new funding programme is launched.