**Choosing the Right Grant Management System for your Organisation**

**Yorkshire Funders online workshop**

**14 August 2024**

The session heard from 4 members who had adopted a Grants Management system for their organisation:

* The Allen Lane Foundation – Salesforce
* Leeds Building Society Foundation – BlackBaud
* East Riding of Yorkshire Council – Flexi-Grant
* The Shears Foundation – Bespoke System

It also heard from Gemma Bull from Modern Grantmaking who has advised UK and international funders on their grant management systems.

**Key points from member presentations and the workshop discussions:**

1. There’s a point in your organisations lifecycle when increased grant making means a system rather than a spreadsheet makes sense. Many of the presenters said start thinking about what system you need before you need it.
2. Think about data migration – do you need it, who will do it, is there a cost to it.
3. Make sure any system satisfies your organisation’s risk appetite – e.g. data security, data warehousing location.
4. Identify your critical criteria you want from a system – e.g. East Riding had 130 essential criteria and 20 desirable
5. Learn from others who have gone through the same process but recognise each funder is unique and will want specific things that might not apply to your organisation.
6. Work out what is important to your board – cost of purchase, ongoing maintenance cost, ease of updating application forms etc, accessibility for users etc and make sure that is made clear to any provider.
7. Moving from a spreadsheet to a grants management system will save you and applicants time in the long term, even if it can feel a bit bumpy at times. If you are or aspire to be more relational in your dealings with applicants build that into the process. Shears Foundation added in a phone call to maintain that aspect even though their bespoke system does everything else.
8. Using a grants management system does bring in more standardised processes like reporting, monitoring etc which saves administrative time.
9. Decide what compromises are acceptable to your organisation – for example some of the systems were very flexible and users can create their own application forms whereas others need to go to the supplier for any amendments.
10. There are other providers out there – e.g. Smart Simple (Yorkshire Funders member Asda Foundation use this system) and some systems use resellers to do the development work and others don’t. Salesforce use resellers like Issimo but Blackbaud and Flexi-Grant don’t.

Gemma Bull gave an overview of the three key things she has learnt from others experience of choosing a new grants management system.

1. **We wish we’d chosen a GMS that helped not hindered us living our values**

It’s so important for funders to agree, well in advance of choosing a GMS, what values this system needs to help you to live up to. For example, let's say you're a funder that really values trust-based grantmaking. You might then develop a list of requirements that are centred around things you value, such as:

* An ability to accept reporting in a wide range of non-standard formats, to avoid grantees having to waste time producing reports just to slot into your system.
* Not setting the default grant duration at some short length, such as 12 months.
* Having progress monitoring that doesn't treat a variation from the original plan like a problem or a deviation that needs documenting, critiquing and approving.

**2. We wish we’d tested our GMS before we launched it to make sure it was accessible to anyone interacting with it externally, and internally**

If your new GMS isn’t accessible it simply means that some people won’t be able to use it. This could be people working within your organisation or people trying to apply to you. We’ve come across too many examples of systems that don't meet accessibility standards (e.g., online application forms that aren’t compatible with things like screen readers), so we know this to be a real danger, not just a hypothetical one.

**3. How will you improve your GMS over time?**

The most fatal mistake that funders make when getting a GMS is to assume that once it’s ‘all set up’ then it’s ‘done’. If your organisation is going to get continually better at what it does, you’re going to need your GMS to get continually better too.

You need to make sure upfront that your contract with your chosen supplier prices in and includes a good mechanism for continually making changes and improvements to the GMS. If this isn’t considered at the time of initial procurement then you can find yourself in a situation where you may only have a very limited amount of time available for changes to be made by your supplier, or where each little change you want is really expensive and painful to arrange, like a contract negotiation of its own.

Furthermore, given that some of the changes to the system will be made directly by your colleagues, you need to make sure they are given a bit of time and space to learn how to modify the tool, not just use it. This will often require a bit of training to help them build confidence.

That’s why we suggest:

* Budgeting from the very start for improving your GMS on an ongoing basis, not just the procuring of it in the first place. This could mean developing skills internally and/or making sure that your contract with any third-party supplier allows for appropriately quick and substantial changes.
* Ensuring that your governance processes will support ongoing improvement. If you’re going to need board sign off for future GMS changes your system will rot, and fast. The world, and especially technology, moves too fast for that kind of old school decision-making.