



Challenges, Choices and Common Applications: Funders' Exercise of Power and its Consequences for Non-profits' Administrative Burden

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Increasing recognition of the administrative burden incurred by nonprofits applying for funding has led to a rise in initiatives aiming to reduce administrative demands made through the process. One initiative is the Common Application Form (CAF), developed by Yorkshire Funders, which enables nonprofits to apply to multiple funders using a single, shared application form.

This study investigates the impact and consequences of the Yorkshire Funders' CAF for the funders themselves, the nonprofits using the form, and the relationship between them.

The author finds that common application forms are not automatically beneficial in reducing nonprofit administrative burden. Rather, their potential to do so is shaped by the decisions of funders and others involved in developing and using the CAF. Funders need to collectively adopt a 'compassionate bureaucracy', making choices in favour of nonprofits even if this may sometimes go against their own interests.

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Background

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Context



- **Nonprofit organisations face considerable administrative burden** when applying for funding, in particular as a result of the funding application process. While recognition of these issues is increasing, top-down funder dominance of the funding landscape has limited a coordinated, collective response.
- Recognition of administration burden and its practical and psychological impacts has led to calls for '**compassionate bureaucracy**': where funders make deliberate choices to limit administrative demands on nonprofits, even where this may increase their own workload.
- **Common application forms (CAFs)** represent such an attempt by streamlining funding application administration for nonprofit organisations by offering a single application process to apply to multiple funders.
- CAFs may take a paper or online application format. They may be used directly to each funder at a time, or via a single entry-point to reach multiple funders at once.
- There has been little research on the impact of CAFs to date, but the **limited available data suggests that CAFs have not led to significant change for nonprofits, or commitment by funders** to increase use of CAFs or bring about wider change at policy level.

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Take aways & Learnings



- The development of Yorkshire Funders' CAF by a taskforce of funders, nonprofits and consultants demonstrated the **need for individual and organisational goodwill, shared values and compromise** to create and enable use of the form.
- Both **funders and nonprofits experienced benefits from the CAF**, including, respectively, ease of comparison and assessment, and increased simplicity.
- Ultimately, the CAF's ability to reduce administrative burden for nonprofits depends on its form (**composition**), the number of funders using it (**take up**) and the extent to which funders used a similar, recognisable form (**commonality**). Wide take up and strong commonality enable nonprofits to copy their responses between grant applications, reducing administrative burden (**reproducibility**).
- However, **some funders still required personalisation or tweaks before using the agreed CAF**, such as adding specific information for their needs. This compromise was **necessary to increase funders' uptake** of the CAF but also reduced its commonality, reproducibility and therefore impact, as nonprofits were prevented from duplicating their responses between applications.
- Despite acknowledged limitations, **the paper offers several lessons for practice, policy and future research**: the willingness for 'compassionate bureaucracy' shown by the taskforce in developing the CAF must extend to its uptake, even where this might increase funders' own administrative burden; CAFs do not necessarily shift power where funders' needs dominate their development and use; and progress is reliant on choices in favour of nonprofits in the wider policy and operating environment, supported by guidance and buy-in from infrastructure bodies, policy-makers and sector leaders.

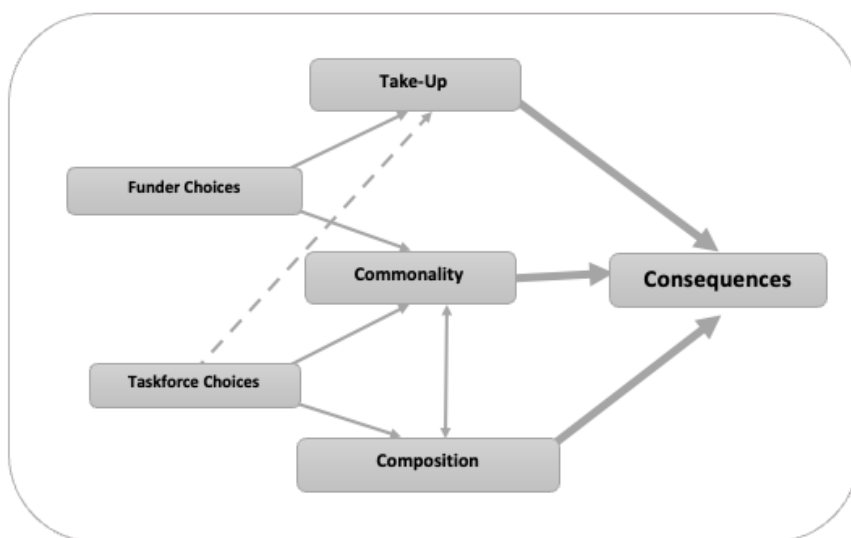


Figure 1: CAF development and impact model