



Foundation  
Scotland

# Foundation Scotland Open & Trusting Progress Report

MAY 2026

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# Why Open & Trusting is important to Foundation Scotland

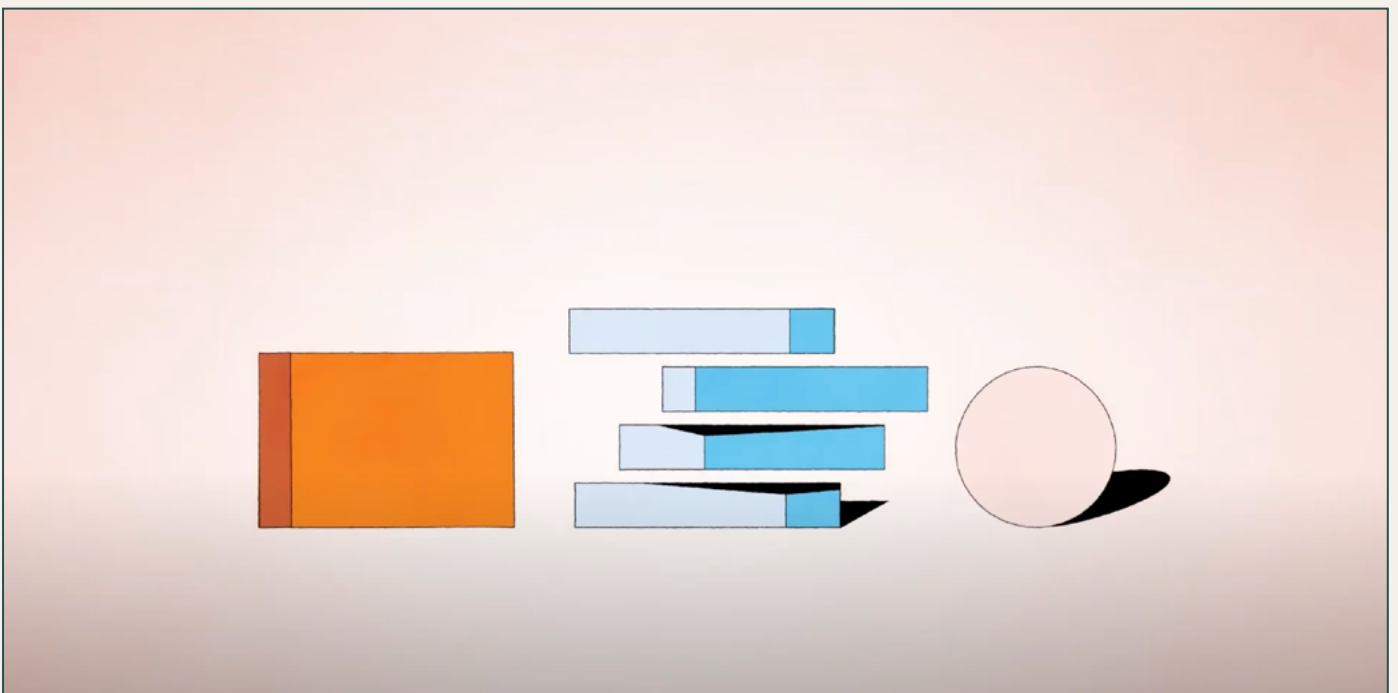
Within any grantmaking trust or foundation, systems and processes develop to guide how decisions are made, how funding is distributed, and the language used in conversations with applicants and grantees.

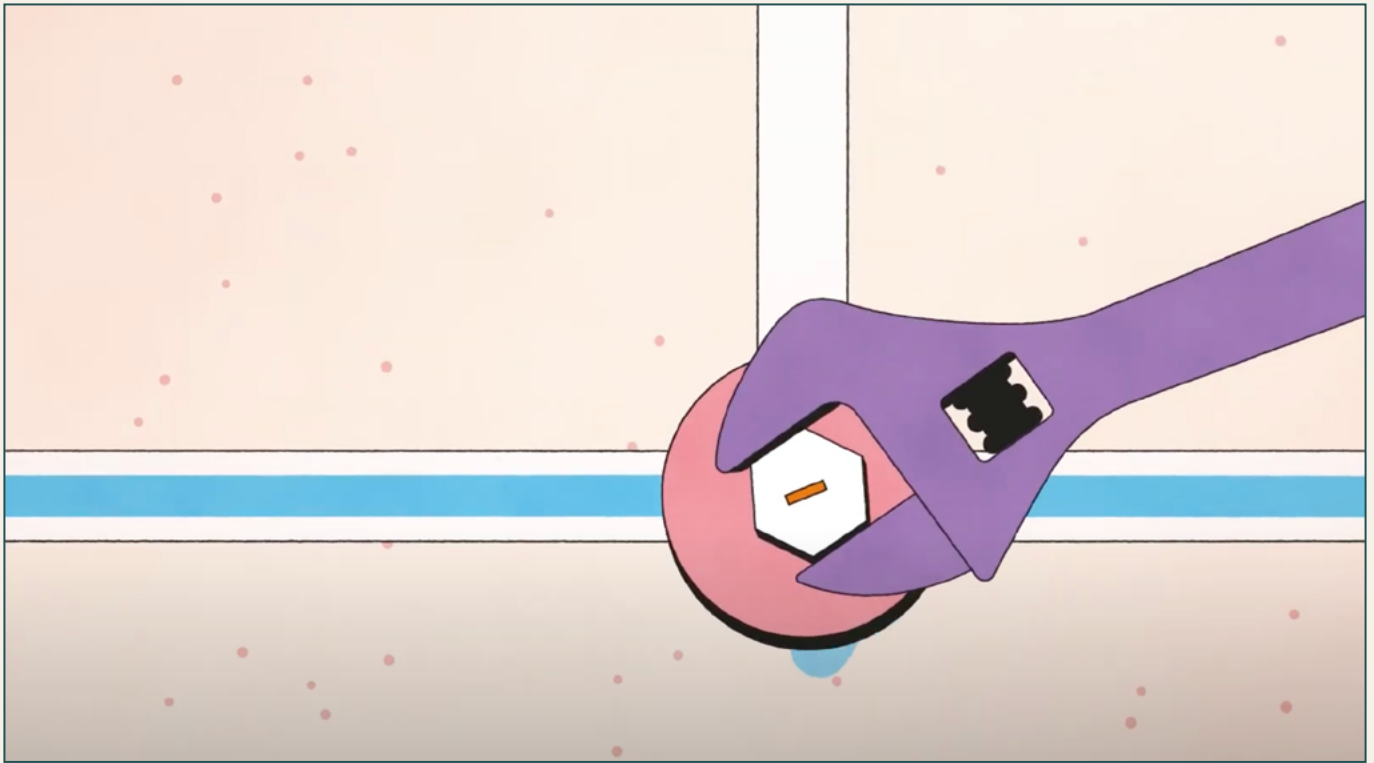
Over time, these approaches can centre the needs and perspectives of grantmakers rather than the organisations seeking support. Because of this, a framework supporting the reversal of this dynamic is required.

Foundation Scotland recognises that we do not operate in a vacuum, but we are part of a wider funding ecosystem where many funders' practices overlap, evolve and influence one another. This is why the Open & Trusting initiative is so important to have as a framework. It provides a shared framework for funders across the sector, rather than one organisation acting alone, to collectively shift towards more equitable, transparent and supportive ways of working that build trust with people and communities.

The commitments offer a common reference point that helps us reflect on and challenge our own processes, ensuring they are proportionate, purposeful and genuinely enabling for the groups we aim to support. It is not a linear process with a fixed start and end point, but a continual process of listening, learning and improving.

Foundation Scotland's vision is of confident, thriving and resilient communities across the country. Engaging with the Open & Trusting commitments helps us shape grantmaking approaches that better support this vision.





## Open & Trusting in Practice

Since joining the Open & Trusting initiative in 2021, a key consideration has been how to make the commitments part of the culture of Foundation Scotland. Open & Trusting should not be a retrospective exercise each year, trying to shoehorn pieces of work into each commitment, but rather a foundational part of our culture as a grantmaker that guides our work.

This has meant actively referring to Open & Trusting when making process or systems improvements.

In August 2025, an information session was delivered by IVAR to Foundation Scotland staff to talk about Open & Trusting, with a view to increasing the level of knowledge and confidence about it, especially as there has been a large increase in staff numbers since joining Open & Trusting in 2021.

An action from this session was to hold sessions once or twice a year, with a space to talk about the commitments, our progress against them and what they mean for the way we work internally and with our stakeholders.

This will ensure that Open & Trusting is not an abstract consideration for a small number of staff in Foundation Scotland but is live and driving our work.

# Open & Trusting and Risk

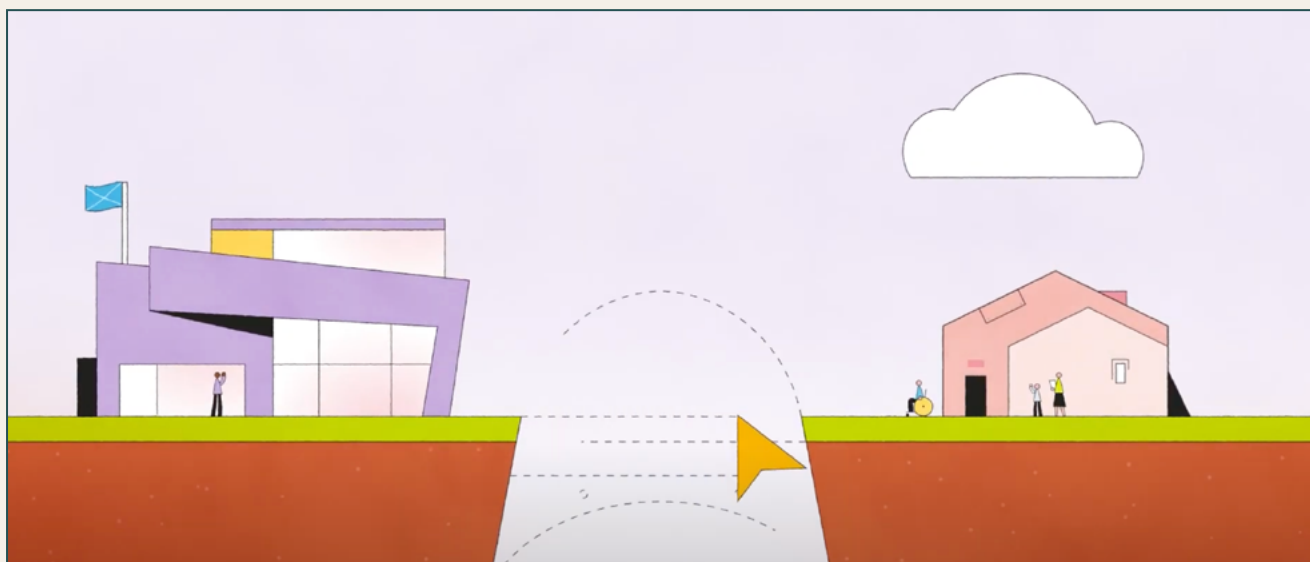
Part of what makes Open & Trusting so powerful is that it requires funders to reflect on and critically examine how and why they act and make decisions. Because of this, Open & Trusting can understandably feel like a risk because it challenges long-established ways of acting, assessing and making decisions.

Many grantmaking processes have evolved over the years through layers of policy, practice and precedent. These systems often feel safe because they are familiar, consistent and perceived to protect the organisation from making poor decisions or being exposed to unnecessary risk. The Open & Trusting principles, however, ask funders to examine these habits, to simplify, to let go of unnecessary control, and to place greater trust in applicants. This shift can feel uncomfortable, particularly when it requires stepping away from processes that were designed to provide reassurance.

Gaining support from boards, panels and senior decision-makers can also be challenging. They hold responsibility for safeguarding a fund's resources and reputation, and may be concerned that lighter-touch processes, reduced reporting or more flexible funding could compromise due diligence or accountability.

In the progress section below, some of the changes implemented have had a significant impact on the amount and type of information that panels and boards receive to inform their decisions. Implementing these changes requires careful attention and engagement, ensuring that stakeholders are brought along collaboratively rather than having adjustments imposed upon them. It is essential to work alongside panels, boards, and other stakeholders to clearly articulate why these changes matter and what they mean in practice.

This approach can mean that progress appears slower in some areas; however, it is precisely this careful, considered engagement that underscores the value of the Open & Trusting framework. By supporting thoughtful evolution rather than rushed change, the initiative has supported Foundation Scotland to develop more effective, transparent, and trust-based practices.



# Progress against the 8 commitments

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## Commitment 1 - **Don't waste time**

Foundation Scotland commits to:

01. Continue to provide step by step fund guidance and eligibility criteria, including clear priorities, information about previous awards, FAQs and top tips for applicants.
02. Encourage enquiries and provide tailored support to applicants, dealing efficiently with your enquiry.
03. For larger applications, we will sometimes request an initial expression of interest and only on the basis of that invite a full application.
04. Where appropriate, use one-to-one assessment calls with applicants to gather further relevant information.
05. Harness technology to make application and grant management (e.g., online applications and monitoring reports) is as efficient as possible for all stakeholders.



Foundation Scotland is rarely the only source of funding for an organisation, and because of this, we want to provide as much information as possible on our website and fund pages to enable organisations to make an informed decision about whether to apply.

Our actions against this commitment have included holding webinars or funding surgeries for open programmes, as well as listing a contact for enquiries. The amount of funding for each round is published, and success rate is also included of many of our funds, and we will be working funds throughout 2026 to increase the proportion of funds displaying this information. As well, we actively redirect applications internally to more suitable programmes without the need to resubmit a new application form.

Some of our large funds with high volumes use Expression of Interest forms, a stage 1 application form where applicants are asked to provide a high-level description of the proposed activity, with a smaller number then invited to submit a full application form.

Although a two-stage application process could be interpreted as acting against the 'Don't waste time' commitment, its role in our funding process means that we are able to only ask for detailed, full application forms from a smaller number of organisations. It allows organisations to share the essentials of their idea quickly and with minimal effort, without having to invest significant time and resources into a lengthy full application that may not be eligible or competitive. This early check-in helps ensure that only applicants with a realistic chance of success move forward.

## Commitment 2 - Ask relevant questions

Foundation Scotland commits to:

01. Ensuring we only ask applicants for information that is relevant to making a funding decision on their application and throughout the grant process.
02. Ensuring our guidance is easily accessible and written in plain English avoiding the use of industry 'jargon'.
03. Providing assessment reports to decision-makers that are clear, focused and only contain appropriate & relevant information.
04. Ensuring that we are proportionate in the monitoring information requested.

In 2025, we reviewed our standard and small application forms to ensure each question was clear and straightforward. Every question was rewritten to remove jargon, and guidance that had previously been hidden behind an 'i' button was brought into the main form, so it is now visible to all applicants.

During our 2022 IVAR Accountability Process, a key piece of feedback centred on our question asking about the environmental considerations applicants were taking in their projects. This was a standard question asked in each of our application forms, regardless of the focus of a project. A challenge provided by the reviewing organisation was how we use the information in that question in assessment and decision making, and if it is not something that is used, why was it being asked.

We used this reflection, as well as data in the 2023/2024 Applicant & Grantee Survey, where it was asked whether the question supported organisations to reflect on their environmental practices; 42% were 'Neutral' and 13% of respondents either 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed'.

If it was not clear how we were using the information asked, and the question was not especially helpful for applicants, we explored whether we should continue asking about environmental considerations. Upon review, we decided to remove the question from our application forms but enabled funds with either an environmental/climate focus or interest to retain if the information would be used to form a decision.

This dilemma illustrates exactly the kind of thoughtful scrutiny encouraged by the Open & Trusting framework, prompting funders to examine not just what they ask of applicants, but why, and to ensure that every question serves a clear and purposeful role in the funding process.

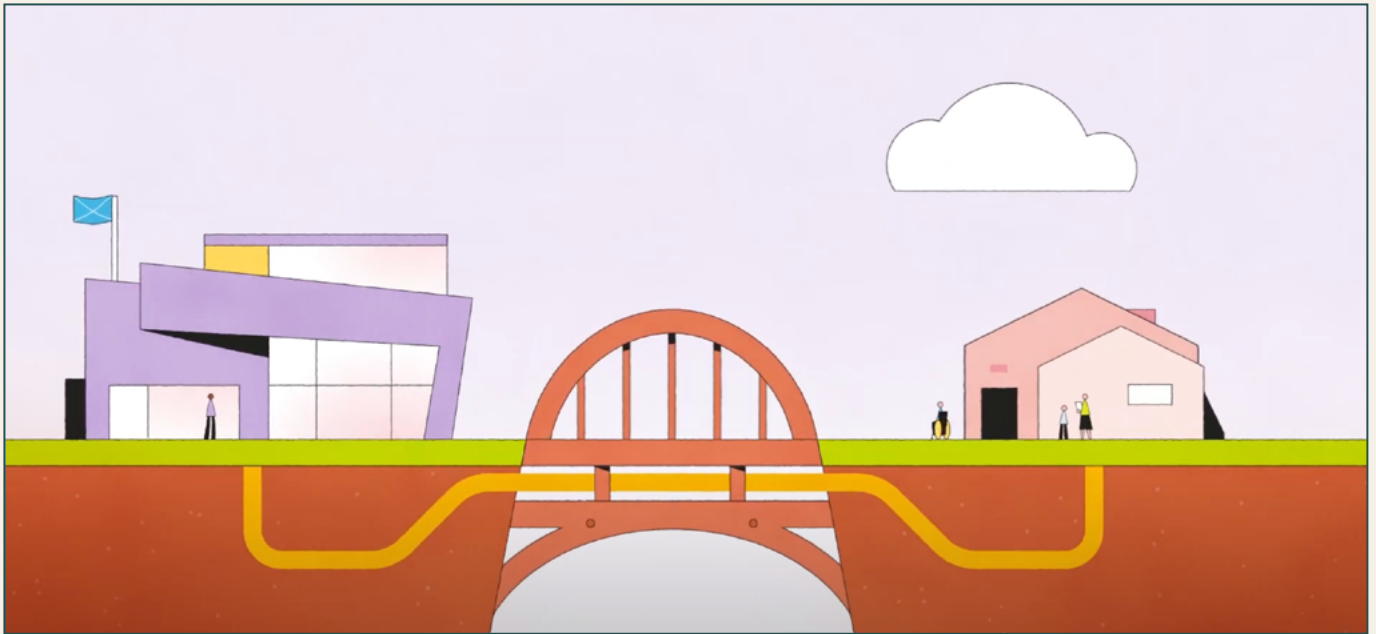
Moving forward, a priority for 2026 will be to review and enhance the guidance and information available to prospective applicants on our website. This may involve refining existing materials as well as developing new resources to better support organisations throughout the application process.

Rather than relying on our own assumptions about what applicants find useful, we will be guided by the insights and experiences shared by previous applicants and grantholders. Our 2024/2025 Applicant & Grantee Survey includes specific questions about what types of guidance are most helpful, and we will use this feedback to shape, develop and test clearer, more accessible support materials.

## Commitment 3 - Accept risk

Foundation Scotland commits to:

01. When considering risk, we will seek to understand the full context surrounding projects, for example the negative impact of the pandemic on the financial position of many organisations.
02. Developing different approaches to fund distribution ensuring that the risk to all our customers is balanced.
03. Continuing to trust grantees to deliver contracted projects.
04. Commit to continually reviewing our approach to risk.



Accepting risk extends beyond the specific actions associated with this commitment, as it underpins and interacts with all parts of our organisation. The Open & Trusting process has provided a valuable framework for exploring what risk means for us, considering our appetite for it, and developing ways to discuss it openly and constructively.

Progress against this commitment has been encouraging. Key actions have focused on our small grants application form and the introduction of a revised small grants assessment format, both of which reflect a more considered and balanced approach to risk within our funding processes.

This approach illustrates the link between proportionality and risk in our grantmaking. In the 2023/24 Applicant & Grantee Survey, some grantees and applicants reported that the standard application form felt burdensome, particularly for smaller grants. In response, we developed a simplified application form for grants under

£5,000, focusing only on the most essential information: a description of the proposed activities and the difference the activity would make. The new form was rolled out during 2024 and was live across all eligible funds by Autumn 2025.

Changes to the small application from necessitated changes to the assessment format for small grants. In Spring 2025, a revised assessment format was developed to harmonise the application and assessment format. The standard assessment format contains sections related to Planning, Need, Fit with Fund, Impact, and provides a robust assessment of a funding request. The revised small grants assessment format removes each of these sections and replaces it with an 'Assessors Comments' section, where the assessor provides 150-300 words about the application. The new format was successfully deployed to all eligible assessments by November 2025.

The revised approach in the new assessment format is toward exception reporting. Rather than documenting every detail, small grant assessments now focus only on what is unusual or requires attention, as well as an overview of how the application fits with the fund and the impact it will have.

Central to this new approach is trust. Trust is required from our panels, boards and donors that we have undertaken the level of assessment required despite the assessment they receive being shorter. Some panels were immediately receptive to the change, many of whom favour shorter assessments. But others were hesitant to embrace the changes, as the established process of forming decisions was based on having a lot of information to dissect.

This is where the Open & Trusting framework provides real use, as it guides funders and decision-makers to ask 'why'.

We were able to use staff who manage the relationships with different funds to support this transition, taking a person-centred approach that supported these changes.

Ultimately, adopting a reduced format required a shift in risk appetite, trusting that decisions could be robust even with less detail, and that proportionate, focused information could still support confident, well-informed judgement.

The next piece of work related to risk will be revisions to our Value for Money guidance, which sets out the number of quotes required for budget items. We want to ease the burden on applicants and better harmonise our own requirements with other funders in Scotland. The learning from the deployment of the new small grants assessment will be invaluable, as it will also cause material changes in the information decision-makers have.



## Commitment 4 - Act with urgency

Foundation Scotland commits to:

01. Continue to provide reasonable timescales for all award decisions and ensure both our deadlines and your expectations are met.
02. Ensuring adequate resource is available to enable timeliness and flexibility in grant-making and fund distribution.
03. Act with urgency when circumstances warrant [e.g., for specific emergency response funds]

All decision timescales are clearly published at the top of every fund page, and our application portal issues automated reminders to applicants with drafts three days before the deadline. In the 2023/2024 Applicant & Grantee Survey, 86% of respondents indicated that the time between application and decision was acceptable.

For many of the funds supported, the period between an application deadline and the final decision is around two months, which is generally positive. Some of the larger Philanthropy funds, however, operate on longer cycles of up to six months. These extended timescales can be linked to a two-stage process, with an Expression of Interest followed by a full application, which lengthens the assessment period.

They can also be shaped by the availability of decision makers, particularly within larger charitable trusts, where meetings may be scheduled less frequently.

We recognise that introducing rolling funding models could help shorten these timescales, but this would carry resource implications and may be difficult to manage during periods of unexpectedly high demand.

## Commitment 5 - Be open

Foundation Scotland commits to:

01. Providing clear feedback on unsuccessful, where practicable, applications which are specific and supportive.
02. Continue to provide transparency via our website on what to expect during our application processes, how we make decisions, and what we expect from grantees.
03. Publish all our awards on our website and on 360Giving.
04. Continue to explore new ways to disseminate information on grants made and to evidence the impact of our funds.
05. Consider ways to involve third parties in reviewing our outward facing communications and [grant making] practices.

We have worked to provide improved feedback to unsuccessful applicants wherever possible. This was reinforced in the Applicant & Grantee Survey, where many respondents highlighted that feedback helps them improve future applications and increases their chances of success. The type and level of feedback we can provide often depends on the fund. For funds with a low volume of applications, it is easier to offer bespoke feedback, whereas for high-volume funds with over 100 unsuccessful applications, providing detailed feedback can be more challenging due to time and resource constraints.

Good progress has been made with this commitment, as we have published all grants on 360 Giving, and our Philanthropy fund pages disclose the amount of funding available and success rates.

One area that remains unclear for applicants is the period between submission and decision. While decision dates are advertised on each funding page, aligning with both the Open & Trusting principles and the 'Ask Relevant Questions' commitment, we could provide more guidance on what constitutes a 'good' application and clearly explain our assessment process. Currently, applicants respond to the questions asked, but it is not always clear what level of detail is expected or the type of information we are seeking. As highlighted in the 'Ask Relevant Questions' section, our next survey will include targeted questions to help us identify what guidance would be most useful to applicants.

## Commitment 6 - Enable flexibility

Foundation Scotland commits to:

01. Exploring opportunities for unrestricted grants with the many donors and panels we support and developing guidance and criteria for offering this.
02. Continue to respond positively to requests for flexibility in use of grant awards where changes are reasonable given project circumstances and remain within the original grant purpose.
03. Explore steps that can be taken to guard against over-reliance on grant funding and encourage opportunities for self-generated income. Target grants to enable expansion of self-generated income where appropriate/ the opportunity exists.
04. Regularly monitor and review fund aims with donors and advisory panels to ensure purposes are still relevant to beneficiary communities.
05. Monitor impact in a way that captures longer term social and environmental change as well as short term indicators.
06. Exploring alternative ways of distributing funds beyond open grant-making, tailored to local contexts and in partnership with donors, advisory panels or other stakeholders.

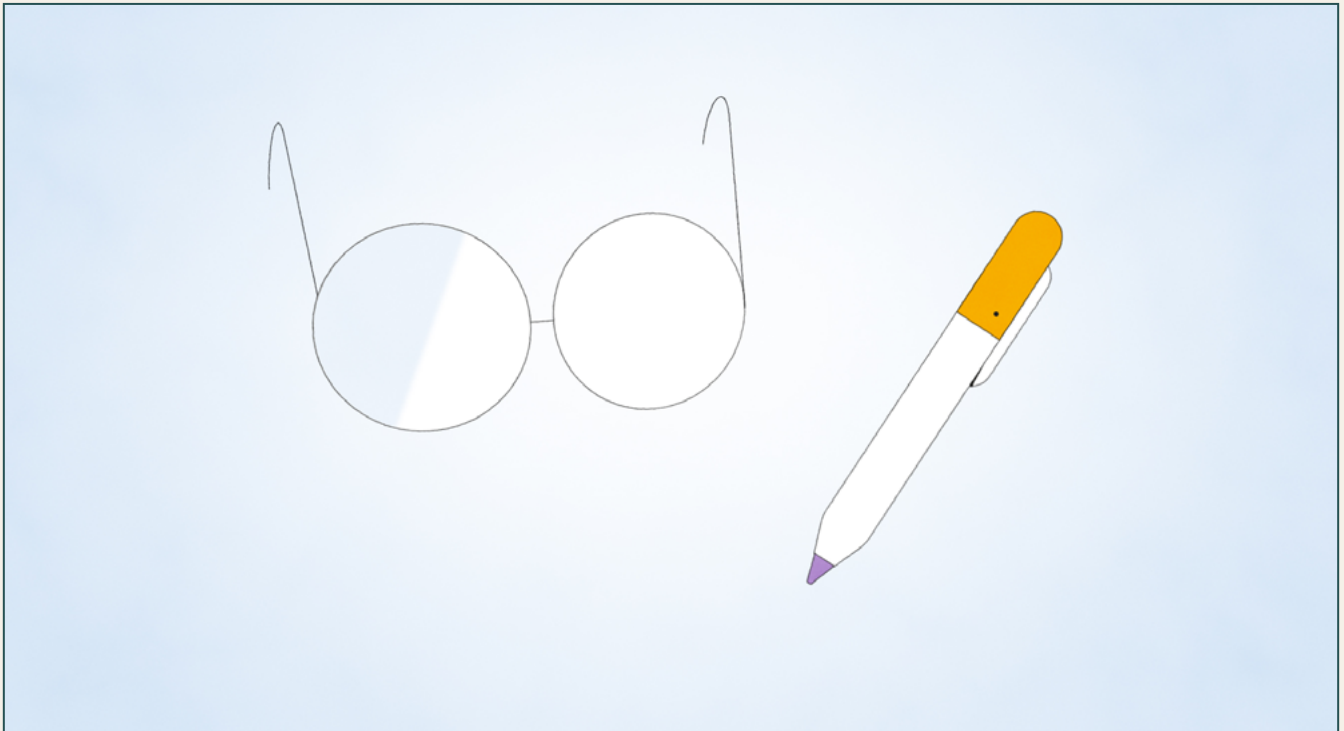
Feedback from both the 2022 and 2024 Accountability Processes highlighted the need to increase the proportion of unrestricted funding distributed by Foundation Scotland. While positive developments have been made in this area, such as the Tackling Inequalities Fund and Women's Fund Scotland, which offer unrestricted support, many of our existing funds also provide assistance with core costs, aligning closely with the Open & Trusting commitments.

Increasing the availability of long-term unrestricted funding will require both process and cultural shifts. From a process perspective, a new unrestricted application form would be needed. Although the recent application form refresh removed explicit references to 'projects' and now refers to 'this grant' and 'funded activity,' the form is still oriented toward project-specific funding and is therefore unsuitable for widespread unrestricted use.

Applicants have also highlighted confusion where funds are described as offering unrestricted funding, but the application form still reflects project-based criteria. This inconsistency can undermine understanding and trust in the funding process.

A cultural shift is equally important. Restricted project funding has long been the norm, and assessors are accustomed to evaluating proposals against predefined project outputs. Moving to unrestricted funding requires assessors to rely more on professional judgement, trust, and an understanding of organisational context, rather than strict adherence to project priorities.

This shift extends to our donors, who may perceive unrestricted funding as higher risk due to its flexibility and less prescriptive nature. Insights from the Tackling Inequalities Fund will be critical in disseminating learning to donors, supporting the creation of new unrestricted funding programmes, and equipping staff with the tools to manage and assess these grants effectively. There is also potential to develop internal tools to evaluate risk and support donors in increasing their investment in unrestricted funding.



## Commitment 7 - Communicate with purpose

Foundation Scotland commits to:

01. Building relationships which are constructive and supportive.
02. Work towards aligning our grant and loan-making with our overall vision/mission and our environmental, social justice and ethical goals.
03. Engage with grantees about impact in a meaningful and supportive way, requesting information that is proportionate and will be used by the Foundation.
04. FS welcomes conversations with other funders about shared grant-making processes.

Some of the progress against this commitment is reflected in our plans to redevelop guidance and resources for applicants, alongside significant work to improve our overall communication.

Throughout 2024, we collaborated with the Funder Safeguarding Collaborative to revise our safeguarding guidance. While the previous guidance contained all relevant information about our approach, its presentation was not very engaging, and it lacked clarity regarding our expectations and practical examples to support applicants.

Safeguarding is also a common reason for including a condition of grant (see 'Be Proportionate'), highlighting the need for updated guidance.

The revised guidance was published on the Foundation Scotland website in early 2025. It now clearly outlines our safeguarding assessment criteria and explains requirements according to the nature of a project and its engagement with children or vulnerable adults.

The document also provides clear explanations of why we ask about safeguarding, what we expect from applicants, and when a safeguarding incident should be reported.

During the 2024 Accountability Process, it was noted that our website could be clearer in helping users locate different funds and access guidance and resources. A new website is planned for the coming year, and once live, we intend to test it with current and prospective applicants to ensure our communications are effective and user-friendly.

We are also active members of the Scotland Funders' Forum and the Scotland Safeguarding Leads Group, strengthening connections across the sector and enabling us to share learning with other funders, many of whom are also signed up to the Open & Trusting initiative.

## Commitment 8 - Be proportionate

Foundation Scotland commits to:

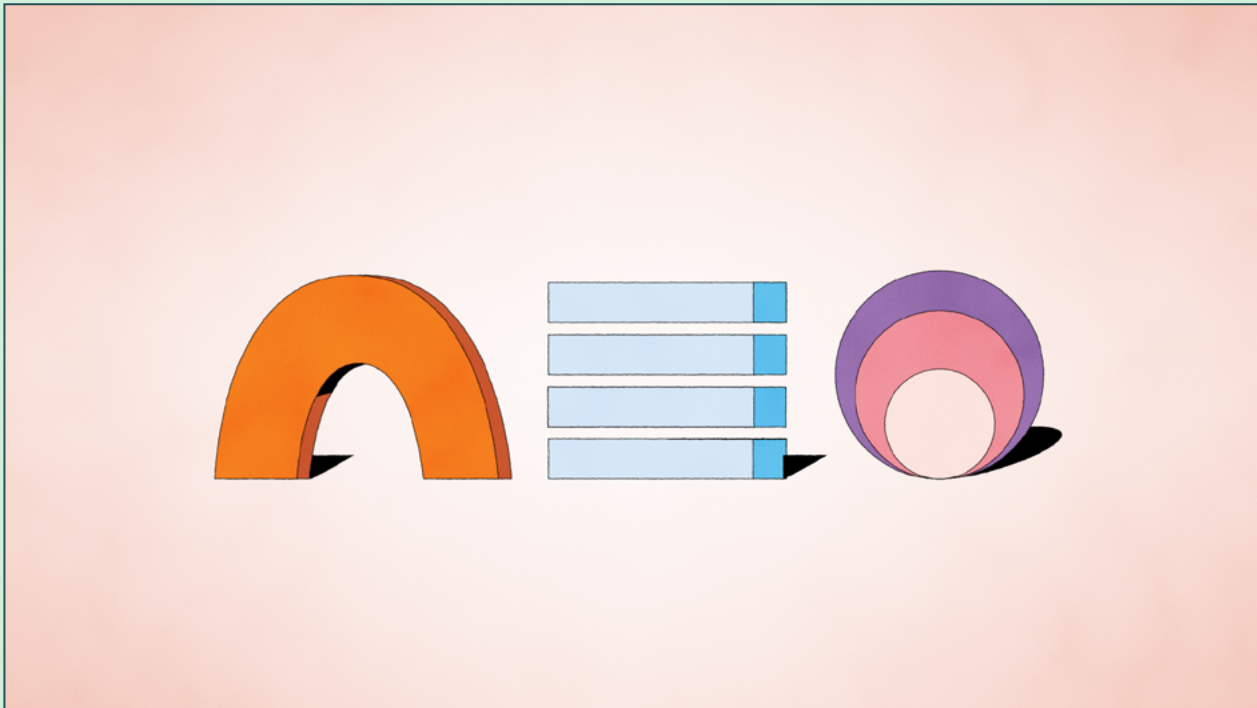
01. Regular (annual) review of application materials and processes to ensure information requested is relevant and proportionate to the funding request.
02. Ensuring grant conditions are meaningful (i.e. actually manage risk), achievable, written in plain English and proportionate to the grant size and risk.
03. Support grantees in meeting those conditions, signposting them where possible to other sources of help.

As detailed in the progress update in 'accept risk' and 'ask relevant questions', so much of our Open & Trusting journey has been about working toward greater proportionality, navigating our own risk appetite to reduce the burden on applicants and internal staff alike.

Another area at the intersection of risk and proportionality is the use of grant conditions. These requirements, which must be met before funding is released, should be clear, achievable, written in plain English and proportionate to the grant size and level of risk.

When applied well, conditions help manage identified risks and can also support organisations to strengthen their governance. They are therefore a developmental tool, not only a safeguard or restriction.

Improving how conditions are used should make the process clearer for successful applicants. There is also a link to wider commitments, as clearer guidance at the application stage – for example, around safeguarding policies, governing documents or quotes – may reduce the need for conditions later.



## Conclusion

Foundation Scotland's engagement with the IVAR Open & Trusting initiative has continued to shape the way we reflect on and develop our grantmaking practice. Across each of the eight commitments, progress has been made to simplify processes, reduce unnecessary burden on applicants, and strengthen approaches based on trust, proportionality and clear communication. In many cases, this has involved reviewing long-established systems, working collaboratively with panels, donors and staff, and being willing to adjust our risk appetite in order to better support the organisations and communities we fund.

While meaningful progress has been achieved, the report also highlights that Open & Trusting is not a one-off exercise but an ongoing process of learning, testing and improving. Some changes require cultural as well as procedural shifts, and careful engagement with stakeholders means that progress may at times be gradual. However, this considered approach ensures that changes are embedded in a way that is sustainable and understood across the organisation.

Looking ahead, our focus will be on continuing to refine guidance and communication, increasing flexibility where possible, strengthening proportionality in our processes, and ensuring that the Open & Trusting commitments remain part of the everyday culture of Foundation Scotland rather than a separate exercise. By doing so, we will continue to develop grantmaking approaches that better reflect our vision of confident, thriving and resilient communities across Scotland.

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