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PRACTICE NOTE **OPEN ACCESS**

Challenges, Choices and Common Applications: Funders' Exercise of Power and Its Consequences for Nonprofits' Administrative Burden

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ABSTRACT

The burdens faced by nonprofits applying for foundational support are increasingly acknowledged by practitioners, funders and other sectoral bodies. Attempts have been made to reduce these demands through common applications, structured sets of questions allowing simultaneous access to multiple funders. A recent case study of one such form reveals how the consequences of its attempts to redress inequality through reducing nonprofits' administrative burden are shaped by the choices of both the taskforce and funders, and thus by their underlying organizational values and external pressures. These findings are theorized through an analytical model which (i) demonstrates the centrality of funder and taskforce choices for nonprofit consequences; (ii) reveals the corresponding inescapable power hierarchy within the application process; and (iii) translates the concept of organizational compassionate bureaucracy from the individual to the collective level. Funders are encouraged to respond with such compassion, supported by taskforces, academics and policy-makers.

1 | Introduction

Recent years have seen a rise in initiatives and strategies aimed at reducing the demands made on nonprofits applying for foundational funding. One such approach is the use of a single application form submitted by nonprofits to funders either separately or via a common portal. There is, however, little insight into the consequences of such initiatives on the parties involved and the relationship between them. Nor is there an understanding of the influences on these consequences and what they mean for any pursuit of equity between the parties.

In response, this paper shows how common applications appear grounded in an intrinsic tension, whereby funders' concerns and taskforces' attempts to encourage take-up stand in opposition to the best interests of nonprofits. Through data from a recent case study, alongside theoretical and conceptual modeling, it explains how resolving this for the benefit of nonprofits requires, firstly, a collective willingness amongst funders to make choices which

seek to reduce nonprofits' administrative burden, despite how these may act against funders' own operational interests (a collective "compassionate bureaucracy" (Wiley and Berry 2018)) and secondly, taskforces and wider environments which enable and support such collective action. Acknowledging the inescapability of nonprofits' position at the bottom of the power hierarchy, it argues for the need to encourage such decision-making through policy frameworks and guidance.

As such, this paper argues that common applications must not be seen as necessarily beneficial. Rather, they must be recognized as mechanisms whose influence on nonprofit outcomes is shaped by the individual and collective decisions and pressures of parties other than the nonprofits. Such recognition will enable steps to be taken to improve the difference these initiatives make.

This paper draws on data relating to the common application form (CAF) of the Yorkshire Funders, a network organization

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Practitioner Points

- What is currently known about the subject matter
 - Research has already revealed the power imbalance in funder-nonprofit relationships.
 - This makes it harder for nonprofits, who are often overburdened with administration.
 - Attempts are being made to redress this, including through common applications.
 - There is little understanding of the implications of common applications.
- What your paper adds to this:
 - A common application does not necessarily reduce nonprofits' administrative burden.
 - The decisions of funders and the taskforce are crucial in shaping their outcomes.
 - Internal values and the wider environment may influence funder and taskforce decisions.
 - What is in the best interests of nonprofits may not match what funders want.
- The implications of your study findings for practitioners:
 - To help nonprofits, funders need to adopt a collective "compassionate bureaucracy."
 - This means choosing in favor of nonprofits, even if this makes things harder for funders.
 - Taskforces and the wider sector need to help funders to do this.

in North-East England. It analyzes these data against existing theories and sectoral trends and discusses what they mean for future policy and practice. It also introduces a model which depicts the consequences of a common application for funders and nonprofits during the application process, with a particular focus on its meaning for nonprofits' administrative burden.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, it describes the environment into which the CAF was developed and introduces the concepts of common applications, administrative burden, and collective bureaucracy. It then discusses the CAF and findings from nine semi-structured interviews about its development, use, and reception. Subsequently, it presents a model depicting the relationship between the different factors shaping the consequences of a common application for nonprofits and funders. Finally, it suggests lessons for both policy and practice, offering a basis for further theoretical and empirical understanding.

2 | The Funding Environment

Nonprofit face considerable administrative challenges when applying for funding. These have long been known, particularly in relation to smaller organizations, and have increased recently in the face of increased demand due to the cost-of-living crisis and post-pandemic pressures (Eakin 2007; Cook et al. 2023). Application processes can be complicated and lengthy, and nonprofits may have to spend considerable time and resources

applying to multiple funders before being successful (Smith et al. 2025). Nonprofits may also feel the need to alter their priorities to ensure funding (the notorious "mission drift") (Rothschild et al. 2016). Such top-down funder dominance of the wider funding landscape is heightened by a lack of coordinated responses and collective commitment, as well as the pressures of internal and wider environments and organizations' guiding values and norms (Petzinger et al. 2021; Roszkowska-Menkes 2022). As a result, attempts at change remain fragmented and idiosyncratic.

Shifts within the funding sector, however, suggest that recognition of these issues is increasing. Changes include moves toward trust-based philanthropy (where funders and nonprofits work together within relationships characterized by mutual dependency and collaboration (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project 2025)), unrestricted funding, and reduced nonprofit reporting requirements (Wiepking and de Wit 2024; Smith et al. 2025). Additionally, improved funder collaboration and networking providing indirect benefits to nonprofits is increasingly apparent (Rex and Foxton 2020; Funders Collaborative Hub (<https://www.funderscollaborativehub.org.uk/>)).

3 | Common Application Processes

Alongside these shifts, the potential for streamlining funding processes has been acknowledged (Fyall 2016; Foundation Source 2025), not least because of the assumed overlap of many application questions (Technology Association of Grantmakers 2021). Indeed, there have already been multiple attempts to use common application processes to simplify experiences. Examples of common forms being submitted separately include the Minnesota Common Grant (Minnesota Common Grant 2025) and the NY/NJ Area Common Application of Philanthropy New York and the Council of New Jersey Grantmakers (Philanthropy New York 2025). In addition, single entry-point funding applications were used by the London Funders' network following the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire disaster and subsequently during the COVID-pandemic (Firth et al. 2025) and the North Texas Cares initiative to support nonprofits' COVID responses (<https://www.northtexascares.org/>).

With the exception of the non-peer reviewed reports of Firth et al. (2025) and North Texas Cares, formal discussion of these initiatives remains limited. Moreover, experiences of these forms have not led to wider assumption of responsibility and commitment by those able to bring about change at a policy level.

4 | Administrative Burden

A number of studies investigating the administrative challenges faced by individuals seeking public sector support adopt the term "administrative burden" to describe not just the practical but also the "psychological costs experienced by citizens when interacting with the state" (Heinrich 2015; Halling and Baekgaard 2023, 181).

A smaller number of studies discuss the role of nonprofit organizations in supporting individuals to manage these

challenges (Tiggelaar and George 2023; Johnson 2025). Of particular note is Wiley and Berry (2018)'s concept of "compassionate bureaucracy." A term which has hitherto attracted little attention, it was used to describe a voluntary organization's "deliberate political choice" (p. 705) to itself deal with the administrative burdens of service users seeking support. This was seen to enable service users to focus on recovery, thereby indirectly helping the organization achieve its targets vis-à-vis user outcomes.

In addition, although practice occasionally notes the administrative burden felt by a nonprofit applying for grant-funding and its negative consequences (Eakin 2007; Good Grants (<https://goodgrants.com/resources/articles/how-to-reduce-administrative-burden-in-grantmaking-5-strategies-for-efficiency/>)), focused literature on this topic is sparse.

5 | Yorkshire Funders and the CAF

Yorkshire Funders is a well-established networking, training and support organization with charitable status based in the large and diverse county of Yorkshire in the North-East of England. It has more than 80 funder members of various sizes, foci, and geographical reach who support its goal of improving lives through "equitable and effective funding" (Yorkshire Funders 2025).

The CAF grew out of Yorkshire Funders' discussions with members, London Funders and the Institute for Voluntary Action Research. Between 2021 and 2022, a taskforce of funders, nonprofits and consultants met regularly to develop a set of questions intended for use by a wide range of funders for grants up to £5000. The taskforce compared existing application forms to determine the most commonly needed information. Subsequently, they drafted questions they believed would best obtain this in a structured and logical fashion. The result is a set of questions that cover both basic organizational information and grant-specific details.

The CAF can be used in paper format or embedded into funders' websites using a third-party platform. It is regularly amended and updated in line with feedback by a dedicated team at Yorkshire Funders. At the time of writing, the CAF is known to be used by 13 UK funders (12 regional, one national) and a partner initiative, a Common Reporting Form, for use during and after grant projects is about to be launched.

6 | Method

Feedback on the CAF's use was obtained during summer 2025 via nine semi-structured online interviews with participants from organizations with direct experience of the CAF's development and/or use (Table 1). Participants were sourced by Yorkshire Funders from taskforce members and those known to have used the form as or on behalf of a nonprofit. Interviews lasted around 45 min and were recorded and automatically transcribed by the recording platform. Questions for funders covered topics such as their involvement with the CAF's development, the challenges they faced, and its impact on their administrative burden, whilst those for nonprofits focused on their experiences of the CAF and the difference it made to their relationship with funders. Participants received appropriate financial compensation for their time.

Interview data were analyzed thematically and supplemented by desktop research and insights from panel discussions at Yorkshire Funders' annual Members' Day in November 2025.

7 | Findings

7.1 | The Creation of the CAF: Compromise and Collaboration

The CAF developed out of the collective efforts of individuals and organizations willing to contribute time and resources toward a shared goal.

TABLE 1 | Details about interviewees and their organizations.

Participant identifier	Sector	Focus	Grant size	Geographical region covered
CAF1	Funding Sector	Broad range of issues	Up to £10,000	Outside Yorkshire
CAF2	Funding Sector	Health-care related to local grassroots	£2000–£5000	Mostly West Yorkshire
CAF3	Funding Sector	Grants related to poverty	Wide range	York
CAF4	Voluntary Sector	Project development and grant-funding for small organizations	NA	Any
CAF5	Funding Sector	General community support work	£1000–£5000	West Yorkshire
CAF6 and CAF7 (interviewed together)	Funding Sector	Small community and personal grants	Up to £1500	Specific area within Yorkshire
CAF8	Funding Sector	Grants supporting grassroots, low income groups	Up to £20,000	National
CAF9	Voluntary Sector	Minoritised communities	NA	Any

It was really to try and make it easy for people in the sense... that they could copy and paste, if they knew what questions to expect... It was just to try and save time for smaller nonprofits.

(CAF2, Funding Sector)

Its creation, however, showed the importance of goodwill and shared values across taskforces, as well as the impact of the pressure of obtaining funder buy-in.

Firstly, taskforce members drove the project forward despite appreciating how its eventual outcome would be less than perfect: flawed change was seen as better than no progress. Indeed, the subsequent creation of a body to respond to feedback evidenced a recognition that the form would require ongoing improvement via practical experience and discourse.

It's one of those things that people had spoken about for a long time... but everybody felt like it's impossible and so the fact that... the team just did it is great... perfection is the enemy of getting it done.

(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)

There was, however, a need for agreement amongst taskforce members in respect of the level of risk to which the form should expose funders. The eventual choice determined which questions were included and, thus, the information funders received. Whilst making this decision, members were aware of how funders' perception of risk would shape their willingness to adopt the CAF.

As a team... being willing to compromise and let some things go... to have one thought is really challenging.

(CAF5, Funding Sector)

Each organization... had to give something up to find the commonality.

(CAF3, Funding Sector)

7.2 | The CAF'S Use: Personalization and "Tweaking"

Despite taskforce efforts to achieve a collectively acceptable level of risk, all funders who used the CAF adapted its content and format to suit their own needs. The nature of this individualization differed considerably between organizations. Some did not migrate over to the CAF but rather used it to assess their existing processes. Others removed or added questions, used it for grants larger than the suggested £5000, or made cosmetic changes, such as swapping out logos.

Funders gave two key reasons for such "tweaking," both related to their guiding values and operational contexts.

1. They needed to obtain specific information to meet their internal requirements.
2. They wanted to avoid performative interactions and protect their relational way of working with nonprofits.

Barriers... the different processes that funders had and people being worried that they would lose their relationship [with applicants].

(CAF2, Funding Sector)

- Some questions just weren't giving what they needed.
- (CAF1, Funding Sector)

Flexibility in common applications is not inevitable: the Minnesota Council for Foundations, for example, recommends adoptees use the exact wording they supply (<https://mcf.org/instructions-funders>). All but one taskforce member, however, was willing to permit personalization in order to obtain buy-in from funders with a wide diversity and breadth of needs. This was acknowledged as a compromise: whilst it was seen as necessary to improve funder take-up, it would limit the ability of nonprofits to repeat responses across multiple funders.

It's very much, use this as the basis... but we understand that you're going to have to tweak and add or edit out the odd thing.

(CAF5, Funding Sector)

Grantees just want it to be as simple as possible and they look at that form and still think it's too many questions... [but] every fund has got the impact they want to make and their strategies and their aims and their goals. I don't know how you ever get away from that power balance.

(CAF8, Funding Sector)

7.3 | The Benefits of the CAF: Simplicity and Self-Awareness

Both funders and nonprofits experienced benefits from the CAF. Chief were:

1. *Simplicity and security*

The CAF enabled nonprofits to communicate how they worked and the difference they made in a structured, comprehensive fashion. Nonprofits could be confident they were providing the appropriate information.

2. *Ease of comparison and assessment*

The form's clarity and structure enabled funders to easily compare and assess applications.

Gives you the ability to talk about you and what you do or want to do... the opportunity to present the things you think are most important or most interesting.

(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)

Gives you the ability to talk about you and what you do or want to do... the opportunity to present the things you think are most important or most interesting.

(CAF4, Voluntary Sector)

3. Increased funder understanding

The CAF encouraged and enabled funders to reflect on their application processes, what other funders required, and what nonprofits wanted from them. This increased their self-awareness and perception, and was seen to improve nonprofits' judgment of funders' attitudes toward them.

It's made it easier... to get to a quicker decision because we're not getting pages and pages of information that we don't need.

(CAF8, Funding Sector)

It's made it easier... to get to a quicker decision because we're not getting pages and pages of information that we don't need.

(CAF8, Funding Sector)

It makes the nonprofits think 'Oh, they are trying. They are bothered about our time and they actually care. They listen to us'.

(CAF2, Funding Sector)

Reviewing our form, learning and hearing and seeing what other funders are including in their application forms has been a real benefit.

(CAF5, Funding Sector)

7.4 | The Barriers to the CAF Achieving Full Impact

Despite the positive outcomes of the CAF for both parties, its full impact had not been achieved. The form had not yet been adopted by sufficient funders with adequate similarity to offer nonprofits the benefits of replication.

It's really important that we get as many funders on board as possible, because if not, it doesn't work as well... it's not common.

(CAF1, Funding Sector)

When [nonprofits] start to see a similar application form... it will come into its own and... be beneficial... it does need time for that to happen... it only really comes into its own if it's used more than once.

(CAF9, Voluntary Sector)

8 | The Model

The CAF's use reveals how its consequences for the parties' administrative burdens were determined by: (i) its form and structure ("Composition"); (ii) the number of funders using it ("Take-Up"); and (iii) the extent to which funders used it in a similar, recognizable fashion ("Commonality," together with Take-Up, "Reproducibility").

How these three aspects impacted on nonprofit and funder administrative burden, as well as key decision-makers and the influences on them, is in Table 2. The ultimate experience of each party was a product of all aspects. Specific points of note are as follows:

- The form's strong Composition benefited both funders and nonprofits in respect of the administrative burdens of the application process. Whilst there is the theoretical possibility that funders' subsequent alteration of the form altered these benefits to nonprofits, there is no evidence for this. This possibility is, however, noted in the model below.
- The data suggest that funders' ability to tailor the form increased Take-Up levels beyond what they otherwise would have been, indirectly benefiting nonprofits. Levels were, however, still low.
- Funders' choices to personalize the form and the taskforce decisions which permitted this benefited funders' administrative burdens. However, this weak Commonality had the opposite effect for nonprofits, who became unable to repeat their answers.

Figure 1 models these findings.

9 | Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. These include the following:

1. The sample size was small and having participants selected by Yorkshire Funders placed it at risk of bias. It would also have benefited from more nonprofit participants.
2. The study was not extensive enough to offer an explanation for the levels of Take-Up or the relative importance of the different aspects of the model. Relatedly, a longitudinal study of the CAF's usage and consequences would be of value.
3. Data were only obtained from interviews. Additional data from other sources would have been useful.
4. No formal records of taskforce meetings were available to strengthen analysis of discussions around the CAF's creation.

10 | Discussion

Although this paper's findings are restricted in their generalizability, they nevertheless offer lessons for practice, policy, and future research.

The CAF arose as a result of stakeholders contributing time, money and resources to its development and implementation. Stakeholders shared a desire to effect change despite known challenges: positive, albeit imperfect, progress was preferable to stasis. This demanded compromise and an awareness of the need to attract buy-in from both funders and nonprofits. This adds to growing evidence countering assumptions of an unwillingness on the part of funders to collaborate, the co-work of

TABLE 2 | The different aspects of the CAF.

Aspect	Aspect strength	Decision maker	Influences on decision maker	Consequences for nonprofits	Consequences for funders
Composition	Strong	Taskforce	Individual values, norms and goals; Environmental pressures	Reduced administrative burden	Reduced administrative burden
Take-up	Weak (albeit stronger than otherwise)	Funders	Taskforce choices in respect of personalization; Individual values, norms and goals; Environmental pressures	Reduced impact of other consequences	
Commonality	Weak	Funders	Boundaries set by taskforce in respect of personalization; Individual values, norms and goals; Environmental pressures	Increased administrative burden	Reduced administrative burden

taskforce members being suggestive of the shift of trust-based philanthropy toward funders, nonprofits and communities sharing “collective power” (Salehi 2024, 3).

Such equitable working was not, however, present in relation to the form’s use in practice. The CAF provided funders and nonprofits with a simplified application process and, despite personalization, its Composition still reduced the administrative burden of both parties, as well as improved funder image and increased opportunities for funder reflection. However, it also revealed the primacy of funder and taskforce priorities in shaping outcomes, with taskforce choices and funders’ decisions shaping the form’s Reproducibility and nonprofit experiences. This dependency left nonprofits vulnerable to taskforce and funder decisions due to an apparent clash between what is in the best interests of each party in relation to the form’s Commonality. Moreover, the polyphonic nature of the third sector means that other factors such as environmental pressures and organizational norms added yet more potential layers of influence (Petzinger et al. 2021; Roszkowska-Menkes 2022).

11 | Lessons and Recommendations for Practice

1. *The consequences of a common application result from the interplay of decisions by funders and taskforce, as shaped by additional organizational and environmental factors.*

A common application’s consequences are determined not only by its Composition (as decided upon by the taskforce), but also its Reproducibility, namely how widely it is adopted and “tweaked” by funders. These choices respond to the taskforce’s decisions around risk and the extent of flexibility they are willing to award funders. Consequences are therefore a complicated mix of interrelated choices and responses by both taskforce and funders. This mix becomes even more complicated when the values and environmental factors behind these choices are taken into consideration.

2. *CAFs of this type do little to shift nonprofit power.*

This link between taskforce and funder decisions and common application consequences shows how common applications do not redistribute power in favor of nonprofits. Indeed, they may even reduce nonprofit power further: nonprofits not only remain beholden to funder decisions, but also become additionally subject to taskforce choices.

3. *Progress is reliant upon funder, taskforce, and wider policy choices in favor of nonprofits.*

As a result of the primacy of funder and taskforce choices in shaping the consequences for nonprofits’ administrative burdens, policies looking to improve outcomes will need to target these decisions. They will therefore also need to examine and seek to influence the values guiding these decisions and the contexts in which they are made. Whilst any moves toward this are to be encouraged, specific actions may include the following.

Firstly, funders’ preferences toward personalizing application processes stand at odds with the benefits offered to nonprofits of their standardization. As a result, supporting nonprofits will require funders to be willing to

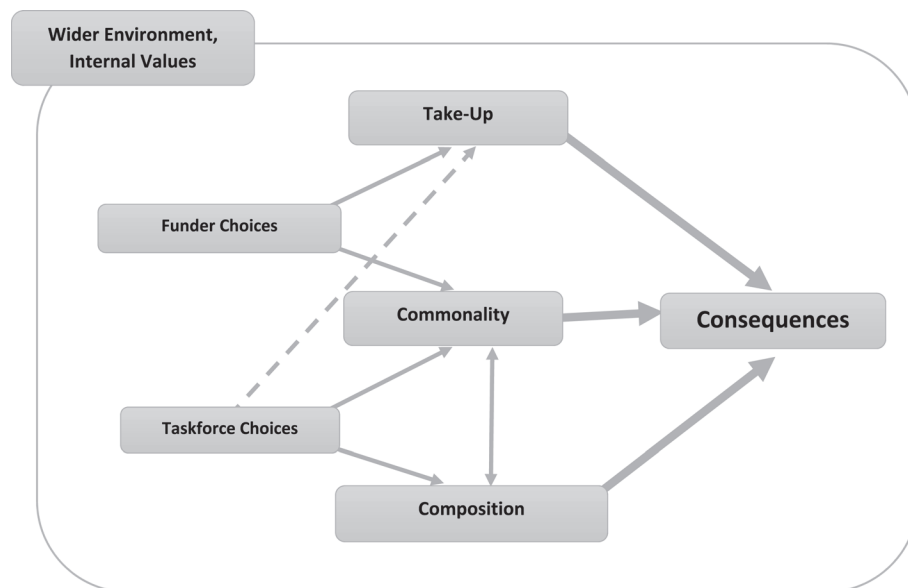


FIGURE 1 | The Model.

make decisions around Reproducibility in the best interests of nonprofits. Funders' apparent preference for personalization suggests this will require a shift toward a collective willingness amongst funders to increase their own administrative burdens in order to reduce those of nonprofits. This extends the concept of compassionate bureaucracy (Wiley and Berry 2018) beyond the choices of an individual organization to collective decisions by the more powerful parties in a philanthropic relationship in favor of the weaker parties, a unique contribution of this paper. This can be encouraged by taskforce choices around composition and personalization, since these create the framework within which funders make these choices.

Secondly, networking and infrastructure bodies, policy-makers, and sector leaders need to support funders and taskforces in making these choices and decisions. They will need to demand more from them, providing recommendations and requirements for them as a collective, holding them to account for decisions, and encouraging dialog and discussion.

Finally, developing the model in this paper both theoretically and conceptually will enable more detailed evaluations of common applications, strengthening attempts to influence and improve them.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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