

Better Funding Case Study



Funding the unfundable: The Boring Fund's bold experiment

CONTEXT

The Boring Fund began as a joke on Instagram, created by Christina Poulton, a fundraising and organisational development consultant who turned a tongue-in-cheek post into a real-life funding experiment. It quickly evolved into a pointed provocation and a practical funding initiative, shining a spotlight on something the sector routinely overlooks: the essential, unsexy costs that keep organisations alive.

The Boring Fund supports small non-profits, CICs, and grassroots groups by giving them exactly what they often struggle to get - funding for insurance, safeguarding, accountancy, staff training, storage, and all the “boring” things that enable safe, effective delivery.

The fund's design is both simple and subversive:

- Microgrants of £200.
- A transparent lottery-based selection.
- Open-source documentation for replication.
- Voluntary administration with fiscal hosting by Creative Sustainability CIC.

This case study was developed in close collaboration with Christina Poulton, The Boring Fund's founder, to explore how one playful idea became a serious critique of how philanthropy works and what doesn't work.

Drawing from a written interview, we have organized the insights into accessible themes to help funders, practitioners, and peers rethink how they value and support the infrastructure behind impact.

Together, these reflections challenge the dominant narrative that funding must always be “exciting” and make the case for funding what's essential.

| Born from frustration (and a bit of fun)



The Boring Fund is based on what I would genuinely do if I won the lottery. I've worked in fundraising and with lots of organisations, particularly small organisations, and I've seen how incredibly difficult a lot of fundraising systems are. So if I suddenly became massively rich, I would set up a fund specifically to pay for the essential costs of organisations.

The things that are not exciting to fund. They're not sexy and they're not direct work with beneficiaries. But that doesn't mean they're not absolutely required. You can't run a proper, safe, effective organisation without insurance, without proper training for staff, without all the practical things. If you're doing frontline delivery you need storage, transport and all of that stuff.

The Boring Fund actually started as a joke on Instagram. I made up a pretend fund, my kids' toys were the trustees, and to apply you just had to comment "boring" on the post. I was going to make a one-off personal donation to one organisation. It was a donation, but it was also making a point about the kind of support organisations actually need.

It had a big response. Then people started messaging me asking how they could donate to The Boring Fund. At that point it didn't really exist, but I realised this was an opportunity to get money to the kinds of organisations my job is about supporting. I do fundraising training and organisational support for small charities, CICs and non profits, so if people were offering the money to those organisations, I wanted to make that happen.

In that first version we gave away five grants of £200. I shared it on LinkedIn and again the response was massive. It felt like one of those moments where you either step away or you lean into it. I decided to see what would happen. Very quickly and easily it raised £7,500 to give directly to tiny organisations doing brilliant work in communities that need it most.

In the scheme of things, £7,500 is not a huge amount of money. But someone commented on the post and said instead of "be the change you want to see in the world", "make a scalable, replicable example of the change you want to see in the world". I thought that was great. That's what The Boring Fund aims to be.

It's a provocation. It's a bit of a joke. But it's also a very practical way of getting cash to small organisations. The original intention was simply to name the fact that organisations need the boring stuff.

| Why the ‘boring stuff’ is actually essential



This is a tricky one, because the answer is: because they literally are essential to small, non-profit organisations!

If you take away all the boring costs, all you’re left with is some people with good intentions. The boring costs are the engine that makes everything work.

If you apply for funding, a funder will look at your website. They’ll look at your accounts on Companies House or the Charity Commission. They’ll look at your reports and your social media. They’ll ask about safeguarding, governance and policies. All of that **costs money**.

Web hosting, training, insurance, accountancy and people’s time. These are the things funders use to decide whether they should fund you, but often refuse to fund themselves.

A lot of funders have requirements around good governance, safety and accountability, but you can’t magic those things out of thin air.



| Unpacking funders' reluctance



I think funders' reluctance to fund these costs comes from two places. One is that funders are still people, and people like to see clear results from their money. It's easy to say we funded 100 food parcels and now 100 families have food. You get that warm glow and you can see the impact straight away.

One of the organisations that applied to The Boring Fund was a food bank that wanted money for shelving. Because if you don't have shelving, you can't store food safely, and you can't prepare food parcels properly. But there's a bigger mental jump from shelving to families being fed than there is from food parcels to families being fed. That sounds silly when you say it like that because it should be obvious, but I genuinely think it's a huge factor.

There's also a massive misconception, fuelled by clickbait media, that charities waste money. In reality, the hundreds of organisations I've worked with are operating on a shoestring. They work incredibly hard. Even where people are paid, as they should be, they are almost always putting in huge amounts of unpaid time on top to make it work.

No one I know in this sector is wasting money. Every penny is made to work ten times over. These organisations are far more efficient than many government programmes or other sectors, because they have to be.

You can see the mistrust in funder guidance. Some funders are very explicit. They say they won't fund staff costs, project management or core costs, because they see them as waste. There's an assumption that everything should be done voluntarily.

Volunteers are amazing and most non profits rely heavily on them. But if you're working with the most vulnerable people in society, you need experience and expertise. You need safeguarding and support to be reliable, not dependent on whether someone can spare an hour here and there. Otherwise you're putting both volunteers and beneficiaries in risky situations.

So a game has developed. Funders say they won't fund core costs. Organisations then have to hide them in applications or pretend core funding is a project. I read something from someone who had assessed a lot of grants who said, we know organisations are doing this and we know they have to. We pretend to believe it's a project.

I don't think it should have to be a game. **If the ongoing stuff works, fund the ongoing stuff.**

| Bridging the gap between funders and reality



I think at the heart of this is often a knowledge gap from many trustees of grant makers about what it actually takes to run a non profit. A close friend sits on the board of a grant making trust, and the thing she brings is that she has actually run charities. She understands what's needed.

So many times they have conversations about something in a funding bid where the issue is simply that trustees have misunderstood it because they don't have that knowledge. That won't be true of all funders, and there are some exceptional ones out there, but funding non profits without a solid understanding of the costs involved in doing the work properly, legally and safely is really tricky.

So I think there are a few ways this could change. One is having people involved in decision making who actually know what it takes to run a small organisation or non profit. Another is creating opportunities for funders and trustees to talk directly to organisations in a way that removes the power dynamic. Not conversations where people feel they have to say the right thing to please a funder, but honest conversations about what is actually needed.

There are some funders who already do this. I've spoken to funders who literally say, we know organisations end up playing these games, so we want to know what you really need to make this happen. Don't make the budget look good, tell us the truth about what it costs. They are few and far between, but they do exist. So find those trailblazers, learn from them, and copy what they do.

Get people on grants panels who understand small organisations. Get trustees out there listening. Find ways to take the power out of the conversation so organisations can be honest about the costs they need covered.

| The reaction: relief, resonance and reach

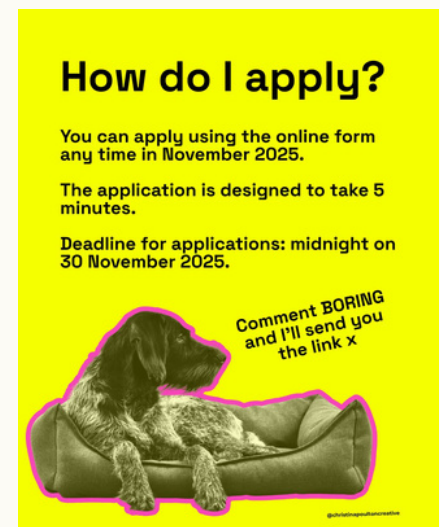


The response to The Boring Fund has been incredible, almost to a ridiculous degree. My “day job” is delivering online training and support for small non profits, I’m not a funder! This was an extra thing that happened almost by accident and I decided to run with it.

I don’t have the capacity to promote it heavily. I put it on LinkedIn, on my mailing list and on social media, and then other people took it and shared it. The response from organisations has been immediate and actually quite emotional. There’s been a real sense of relief, like finally someone is saying this, or finally someone gets it. A lot of people have said things like why do we have to lie about this all the time, why is it always a fight?

A usual LinkedIn post from me might get around 600 views. The post saying The Boring Fund was open for applications has had more than 300,000 views. That’s entirely down to people reposting it and sharing it. I’ve had messages saying people applied because they saw it in a funding newsletter or through a voluntary sector support organisation. People are recognising this as something that needs to be shared.

What I would love is for the organisations that support the sector and bring funders together to advocate for the same thing. I’m not deluded about the scale of this. The grants were £200. They absolutely made a difference to the organisations that received them, because they are tiny. But this problem exists at every scale. It’s particularly visible in small organisations, but it’s a sector wide issue.



| Why we chose a lottery system



We selected the grants using a lottery. There were a few reasons for that: one was practical. We knew it was going to be popular and I'm administering this voluntarily, and the fiscal host, **Creative Sustainability CIC** were also donating their time, so it had to be manageable.

The other reason is more intentional. It's an experiment in how funding works. You can either make organisations jump through lots of hoops to prove need, or you can trust that if someone is running an organisation and putting their time and energy into it, the need is there.

There's a huge power imbalance and a huge lack of trust between funders and organisations, and I don't think that reflects the reality of how money is actually used. With The Boring Fund, we did eligibility checks on the organisations that were selected in the lottery, rather than asking everyone to go through that process.

Asking organisations to make the case for why they need the boring stuff felt like a waste of everyone's time. No one spends money on insurance, accountancy or safeguarding unless they have to. The need is obvious. If you don't understand why it's needed, you can google it. There's no point asking people to write essays about it.

In traditional grant systems, organisations are asked to provide huge amounts of information to prove need and public benefit. The onus is on them to do a lot of unpaid work, often for relatively small amounts of money. For me, that feels out of proportion. The level of risk management could be much more balanced.

I also wanted to make sure I wasn't recreating the same power dynamics I'm trying to question. A couple of small organisations were paid for their time to go through the application process with me. They helped check that it was clear, that it made sense, and suggested changes which were then made.

I also talked through the lottery approach with them and with other organisations. How do you meaningfully judge need between a new parent experiencing postnatal depression, someone relying on a food bank, or someone living with a specific medical condition? It's subjective. You end up asking organisations to compete over whose situation is worst. In that sense, the lottery is also a provocation.

The grant system often forces organisations to fight it out over who is most deserving. We wanted to take that fight out of it.

| Replication and open source tools



Another thing I didn't expect when I started this is that people started getting in touch from other countries asking how to set up their own version of The Boring Fund. That's led me to make the whole thing open source.

I'm sharing the documentation, the process, the application copy, the admin setup and the name. If you want to take it and run your own Boring Fund, you can.

I've heard from people in The Gambia, Kenya, the US, Australia and New Zealand. I've also had conversations with people looking at this from a corporate giving angle and asking how corporates can fund more of the boring stuff. One community centre used the idea for their Christmas campaign. Their ask is literally "buy us something boring" like blue roll and cleaning supplies. Which is exactly what they need to keep the centre running.

I've also had really encouraging conversations with people who work for grant makers, or who advise grant makers on strategy. The response to The Boring Fund has been useful evidence of just how needed this kind of funding is.

There's a reason funders like Garfield Weston and Esmée Fairbairn are so widely respected. They're transparent, they're clear, and they respect the work organisations are already doing. They say tell us what works and we'll fund that, rather than asking people to invent projects so someone can stick their flag in it.

The Boring Fund is a provocation. It's easy to say from the outside you should do things differently, and I know that. But a lot of the systems we use in grant making were designed in the Victorian era, with power dynamics that don't sit well now. It's all based on comfortable rich philanthropists helping the deserving poor and patting themselves on the back for it. Most funders aren't intentionally trying to replicate that, but the structures are still there.

There is a real moment right now where many funders are rethinking how they work, and some are doing genuinely brilliant things. My hope is that this energy leads to real change, not just defensive tweaks that push organisations further at arm's length.

| Shifting the system



Everything I do in my work comes back to the same question. How do we take systems in the non-profit sector that are built around power imbalance and not just improve them slightly, but dismantle them and build something better in their place. That's what I do with how I offer support, the training I provide, the jargon-busting, making it cost accessible etc.

Standard fundraising support, training, and conferences can cost a lot of money. That's not to say people shouldn't charge properly for their expertise – absolutely they should. I'm not knocking fundraisers. But if you don't have that money, you can get stuck in a system where you don't really understand grant funding. You don't know what you're supposed to write, you spend hours putting in unpaid time, get turned down, and have no idea why.

A lot of my work happens on Instagram. People DM me questions because they've been Googling for ages and still don't understand the terminology. There are great campaign organisations tackling equality in the non-profit sector, but there's still work to do.

Don't even get me started on governance and voluntary trusteeships – that's a whole other system that needs tearing down and starting again. My plans for the future are to keep trying to smash the system, and to give the people I work with the tools to remake it in a way that works for them. It should be about the change they're trying to make in the world.

| A final word to funders

If you're a funder, you can make real change in the world- both for beneficiaries and for organisations led by marginalised groups- by funding the boring stuff. Do it!

About Christina:

Hi, I'm Christina (she/her).

I work with charities, CICs and community orgs to make your work easier to manage and fund. I've been working in the nonprofit sector since Linkin Park were topping the charts. I have run and successfully fundraised for many organisations and have trained 1500+ people in fundraising and organisation set up.

Most of the organisations I love to work with are run by one person, accomplishing amazing things through sheer determination to change the world. I offer online training and resources that are designed for small organisations and focus on jargon-busting and demystifying. I'm honest about the inequality that exists in funding and the charity sector, and I want to smash the system that makes it too difficult, intimidating or expensive for people to get support. **There's more about me here.**

