

Better Funding Case Study

Gower Street:

Taking a ***relationship-based***
approach to ***climate funding***





Introductory Note

This case study was developed in close collaboration with the Gower Street team to share reflections on their journey, model, and evolving practice as a funder.

The insights were gathered through a Q&A format, allowing the reflections and language of the Gower Street team to be shared directly.

We are sharing this case study to make these learnings more accessible and useful for funders and practitioners interested in relationship-based grantmaking, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy for partners, learning alongside grantees, and exploring approaches such as spend-down philanthropy in response to urgent challenges like the climate crisis.



Background to *Gower Street*

Gower Street is a UK-based small funder, working in a relationship-based model, centred on trust and open communication. Our funding supports a just and rapid energy transition, and we work primarily in the UK and Ghana. We typically work with small organisations, or individuals in the early stages of their organisation's life cycle.

Gower Street started out as an education funder in 2007 and in 2018, founders Sophie and Nick Marple pivoted the focus of the Foundation to the climate crisis. A few years later, they decided to spend all of the assets and close by 2030, recognising the urgency of the global situation and the importance of this decade to make change. In 2021, the founders realised they would need help to achieve their ambitious plans and appointed Sally and I as co-directors to help administer the spend out.



How do you *identify* and *vet* your grant partners?

Gower Street is a proactive funder, so on the whole, we approach potential partners. Oftentimes organisations and individuals are recommended to us, we then do some initial research and if they align with our priority areas, we reach out to them. As we are pretty embedded in the sectors we fund in, we place a lot of trust and importance in people's recommendations and insights from within our network.

We are also very aware of not being blinkered in a bubble of 'who we know' and via our [website](#) there is a clear route for people to get in touch if they feel their work is closely aligned to the work we fund. The team reads and discusses all one-pagers we receive via this route and a small number of them have led to long term partnerships.



Why did you decide to *take a relationship-based approach to funding* and what does this mean to you?

The team at Gower Street came to the work with varying levels of insight into the world of fundraising and philanthropy but one thing we all had in common was the wish to adopt a relationship-based approach to our funding. Together *we prioritise understanding the work of our partners and take the time to get to know them, what motivates them, why they do what they do.*

When Sally and I joined the organisation in 2021, we refreshed all of the Trust's processes and systems, stripping out all unnecessary bureaucracy and admin so that grantees were not overburdened. As a team we agreed to get rid of the traditional foundation practices that we felt did not add value to our relationship building with partners and this meant we could reduce the burden on time and resources for all we work with.



You provide core unrestricted funding. *Why did you decide to do this?*

Where possible we provide core funding rather than restricted, recognising the increased value that unrestricted funding offers our partners. However, many of our partners still require specific projects to be funded and we will always have a discussion about what makes most sense for each partner. ***We tailor our funding offers to meet the needs of our partners and therefore do not apply a standard approach.*** When you look through our 360 Giving data you will see lots of programmes and projects funded by us alongside lots of core, unrestricted grants.

What kind of reporting do you ask from partners?

Gower Street is passionate about learning from and with our grant partners as their work develops. To really understand their progress and how we can help them accelerate their impact, we have regular check-in calls, encouraging our partners to share, reflect and discuss the work. We ask for copies of any reports or evaluations they produce for internal use or for other funders, but we don't ask partners to produce reports specifically for us.



How do you *measure the impact* of your support?

As a team we reflect on each grant we make, discussing together each of the quarterly calls. Over the lifetime of the grant, as our relationship with our grantees becomes stronger, we are able to ask our partners for honest thoughts on the impact they feel they are making and also how the Gower Street grant and our relationship with them has benefitted the work.

As a core team of four (Nick, Sophie, Sally & myself) we have weekly debrief meetings to ensure all of us are aware of any key insights, requests or feedback we have had from our learning calls with partners. We each wear many hats (outside of our Gower Street roles) and bring our whole selves to these conversations, trying to think of useful connections and insights we can offer our partners. This forms a large part of our resources as a team, and we see it as a central part of our practice. Therefore, when we come to assess the impact of each grant, we each have a depth of insight into each relationship.

As a spend out funder, we deploy significant time and energy thinking about the long-term sustainability of our partners and ***a key measure of success for us is whether we have been able to support partners to secure funding to mitigate the impact of us exiting*** the market.



Have your *practices and approach* changed at all over the years? If so, how and why?

Since 2018, when we pivoted the majority of our funding to the climate sector, our way of working has changed significantly. When we later decided to spend out our funds, our practices and approach further evolved as it became critical to focus on how and where Gower Street could have the most impact in a short amount of time. We have refined our focus over the years, clarifying our role in the ecosystem and as our approach has matured, we've always kept our website and communications updated so our partners are well informed about our funding status. We are now in the final phase of our spend out journey.

With the final pot of money, we are funding work in the UK centred on 'seeding the future'. This means seeding work which is longer term and deeper than parliamentary cycles and that will hopefully flourish and have impact in the world after Gower Street has closed. In Ghana we are investing in three work strands: Life in a Changing Landscape, Complementary Climate Education and Energy Transition. These work strands encourage our Ghanaian partners to work in collaboration and build resilience within their organisations, offering them a better chance at securing funding from other international funders once we exit.

This shift in funding emphasis recognises where we are in our life cycle as a Trust. It also aligns deeply with our commitment to bring in the voice of nature into our governance and decision making, which has encouraged us to be less boundaried and wilder in our thinking and funding.



What motivated you to sign up to IVAR's Open and Trusting Grantmaking pledge?

We are committed to progressive philanthropic practices. We are keen to learn and improve and are always open to receiving feedback and being challenged to consider new/different ways of working. Therefore, it made eminent sense for us to join the pledge as it aligned with our values and principles.

These are The eight commitments of IVAR's Open and Trusting Grantmaking:

- 1.** *Don't waste time*
- 2.** *Ask relevant questions*
- 3.** *Accept risk*
- 4.** *Act with urgency*
- 5.** *Be open*
- 6.** *Be flexible*
- 7.** *Communicate with purpose*
- 8.** *Be proportionate*

Which of the pledge commitments have you found most challenging?

We haven't found any of them challenging – they all align strongly with our practices, values and principles.

[Learn more about The Commitments of IVAR's Open and Trusting Grantmaking.](#)





We love your *focus on learning with partners!* Could you share more about that?

We see it as going on a journey with our partners: we learn as they learn. We ask for frank and honest engagement with us and we provide the same. We try to keep bureaucracy as low as possible and opt for regular check-in calls over written reports. On our partner calls, we provide space for our grantees to lead with what is most pressing for them and we tailor our conversations around their organisation's specific grant and circumstances. The key themes we cover in our learning calls are:

- ✓ *How is the organisation doing? (this includes a strategic, operational and financial perspective)*
- ✓ *What are you seeing/hearing from within and outside the sector? (trends, opportunities/concerns)*
- ✓ *Tell us about the work our grant is supporting; what's gone well and what's not gone so well?*
- ✓ *Tell us about the key issues you are working on – what is concerning you, and/or what opportunities are you excited about?*






Better Funding's lens on this approach

By taking a light-touch approach to applications and reporting, Gower Street reduces the administrative burden on small organisations, enabling them to focus on what they do best: making a difference. Their conversations with partners centre on mutual learning, fostering openness and building trust. This approach not only strengthens relationships but also helps Gower Street become a more informed and effective funder, deepening their understanding of the challenges partners face and the wider context in which they operate.

Their emphasis on long-term sustainability - including support to secure additional funding - reflects a genuine commitment to partnership. By investing in organisations beyond individual grants, Gower Street extends the impact of its funding well beyond its own lifespan. We hope more funders will champion their partners in this way and recognise the value of a relationship-based approach to funding.

What do you **hope to achieve** before you spend down the foundation?

-  *To secure/identify follow on funding for our workstreams and partners where possible.*
-  *To share our learning and experiences and actively agitate where we feel we can add value to the philanthropic ecosystem.*
-  *To celebrate and platform the amazing work that our partners do.*



What would you like to see other funders do more of?

1. We regularly come across funders who waste a huge amount of their partners' time and energy (and money) asking for excessive application criteria and reporting.

We'd like to see more funders trusting their grantees, working with them in partnership, thereby shifting the power dynamic.
2. Gower Street has benefitted a great deal from putting nature on our board. It would be great to see other funders building nature into their Governance structures ([see this blog](#) for more information on our journey on this).
3. Many funders plan to fund into perpetuity without thinking why. We'd love to see more funders periodically consider whether it's time to spend down their resources.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

We are part of a dynamic, UK-based Spend Down Funders group. You can learn more [here](#) and [here](#).



With thanks to **Tessa Durham, Co-Director at Gower Street** for contributing the reflections that informed this case study.

You can learn more about Gower Street's innovative work here:

<https://www.gowerstreet.org>



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