

Strengthening relationships with grantees: A tale of two cities

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Two city councils, Leeds and Sheffield, are using ‘grant surgeries’ in their grants’ programmes. These open sessions with prospective applicants enable the grants’ team to connect with new organisations and strengthen relationships in the community. These conversations are an example of an entry point into an Open and Trusting approach to grant-making for local authorities and public agencies. This case study provides the detail of how these councils conducted the grant surgeries and the impact it has had for their team and for their partner organisations.



What is a grant surgery?

Grant surgeries, also known as funding advice sessions, are drop-in consultations that funding teams within public agencies host to allow potential applicants to test out ideas and ask questions about the grant application process.

Starting with ‘grant surgeries’ in Leeds

Ann Wishart, Arts Development Manager



We introduced grant surgeries for two reasons: One was to touch base with potential applicants, and to see what the sector looked like. Secondly, we wanted to help potential applicants to fill out the form. The grant surgeries are an important element of the application process because applicants can only apply every two years for revenue funding so it can be a blow if they are ineligible on a technicality.

At the start of each grant cycle we aim to talk through the grant scheme with potential applicants. Following that, we offer individual grant surgeries, what we call funding advice sessions, in person or via Teams or phone call as a mandatory part of the application process.

We aim to do the launch event and many of the grant surgeries in person. We offer them at different times of day in the weeks before the application deadline to be as accessible as possible. The face-to-face aspect can respond better to access needs and one-to-one conversations can make people feel more at ease. An administrator or chief executive might not feel comfortable to ask a question in front of their peers, especially something that they might consider to be obvious.

The grant surgeries provide half an hour of concentrated time with the organisation or individual artists. We use the sessions to give tips and examples. It's also a good chance to get feedback from potential applicants. We don't assess applications in the sessions, and we make this explicit. Sometimes the sessions have opened opportunities to answer questions not related to the funding such as where an organisation can find rehearsal space.

“I enjoy the grant surgeries. I enjoy being able to help people, just listening. And I get such good feedback afterwards.”

We offer 40-60 sessions per funding round with a budget of 45 minutes per surgery (including a buffer of 15 minutes). One challenge is that in the last week of the application process some organisations or artists may not be able to book a session and are therefore ineligible to apply for funding. We have learnt to hold back a few emergency sessions for the last week.

Four benefits of introducing grant surgeries

We've refined our grant scheme. We honed the new grant scheme that we launched in October, based on the feedback we got from the surgeries, and we've increased the number of surgeries we deliver.

We're getting better quality applications. We are getting more applications but fewer ineligible applications. Those that aren't eligible can identify that early and seek funding elsewhere.

We're strengthening our relationships with ALL applicants, even those who are not successful. We get to know the grantees who are delivering activities or services in Leeds. It's an opportunity for applicants to get to know us, a major funder in the area. We're able to provide some advice and matchmaking. And even though we can't fund all the applications, we are building relationships across the sector.

We have a stronger understanding of the arts and culture sector. We can check the temperature of the sector. We know that the visual arts sector is really struggling and that funding budgets are shrinking. We have also learnt that venues are closing across Leeds and so we have tried to help artists and organisations to find new premises by connecting them with other contacts that we have.

Setting up 'grant surgeries' in Sheffield

Rob Malyan, Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer



In January 2024, the commissioning team leading on relationships with the voluntary and community sector at Sheffield City Council, set up a grant surgery for our community meals small grants programme. We were keen to adapt our application processes and our choice to implement a grant surgery was affirmed when we heard the positive experiences Leeds City Council had through their grant surgeries at a recent Open and Trusting workshop.

Our aim for the grant surgery was to support the organisations providing community meals with the grant application process, but it was also a chance for our team in the council to be more visible and accessible to the community. We provided direct support to organisations, 'on location' in their community spaces. We also held a drop-in event one morning in central Sheffield where any organisation could attend and receive advice on their grant application.

We recognise that completing an application is a skill, and that relying on the written word is a barrier to applying, and limits how communities can articulate what's important to them. We encouraged potential applicants to bring a range of materials and media to include as part of their applications. One organisation brought along a self-published book of recipes that their members had compiled. Organisations could discuss their work with us and we would write notes that formed the basis of their grant applications. We then sent these draft forms back to organisations to finalise and submit.

Our team recognised that not every organisation attending would be a good fit for our small grants. So, we ensured that there were other funders and support organisations attending, including the South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau (for funding and development advice), Voluntary Action Sheffield (for support on governance and safeguarding), and ShefFood (a community food network in Sheffield).

Although not all the organisations who received direct support from us applied for a grant, this can be seen as a success. Those organisations who were not a good fit for our grant were referred to other funding and saved time and resources by not applying.

The impact for grantees

Making theatre and funding more accessible

Chris Lloyd, Executive Producer



A strong history with the city and the council

Red Ladder is a radical theatre company founded in 1968 in London. Our company has a colourful history rooted in the radical socialist theatre movement in Britain known as agitprop and produces new theatre, touring nationally and contributing to social change and global justice. In the mid-70s, we moved from London to Leeds so we've got a very strong history with the region and city. We tour nationally, but we also do some hyperlocal work in community centres, working men's clubs, and sports centres.

We work to make theatre more accessible. The idea being that some buildings, such as theatres, aren't necessarily particularly user friendly. Sometimes if you don't know the rules, you don't know the dress code, you don't know to queue for a drink, you don't know how to get a ticket – you might not attend a performance. The idea behind a hyperlocal touring is that you can walk there or get the bus. It's a venue that you're familiar with. You know what the rules are; you know what the etiquette is; and ticket prices are really low. It's about making audiences as comfortable as possible.

When I first joined Red Ladder in 2006 we didn't do much work in Leeds and we didn't get much money from Leeds Council. We made a conscious decision to change that. We felt that we could take the name of Leeds City around nationally and champion the cultural offer that Leeds had. We also wanted to try and keep the graduates who are coming out of the city's four universities, in the city. Our aim was to try and make Leeds a much stronger cultural base and have more personnel, to be able to call on actors, designers, and directors.

We received a small pot of money from Leeds Council which was increased from £2500 to £5000. It kept a dialogue going. If there were other funding pots or other opportunities, or commissions, then our name would be in the frame for those.

We feel that the council values our work in and around the city, but also we take the name of the city out on the road, so it feels that we have a strong relationship.

Engaging in the grant surgery

We attended a session at the civic hall introducing the grant. They explained who was eligible to apply for what. It was in person which was nice as we've not really had one of those since the last funding round with the pandemic. It enabled people to get to know each other in the room, to understand the programmes and processes for applying and there was an opportunity for Q&A. It felt like a good thing to do from the Council.

There were also mandatory one-to-one sessions. And you could not apply without having had one of these surgeries. We had two questions which weren't answered at the launch event and maybe one or two that we needed to get some more advice on, such as whether you could apply for both core funding and project funding. Ann and her team had the answers to most of the questions we asked.



Photo: Anthony Robling

Ann and the Council did a really good job with the grant surgeries. The enthusiasm was there. It would have been very easy on an afternoon to be a bit more jaundiced and tired, but she kept the energy levels going. She must have said the same thing 100 times. It's a good discipline to meet people who are applying and get a sense of an organisation.

The other thing about those sessions is that in a nice way the Council could say, "you're not suitable or not at the right level" and offer other opportunities, which is nice to do face-to-face rather than in an email.

"If the council was not aware of you or your company or your work, it's a great short slot to be able to put yourself forward."

The communication around the revamp of the grants was good and very clear. Previously it was quite an onerous form to fill out, especially if you're only asking for small sums of money. You had to answer all the same questions if you were applying for £5000 or if you were applying for £105 000. And the monitoring similarly was quite onerous.

That's been addressed and they have introduced funding bands - the different grant programmes automatically put you in different bands. And the terms or conditions are commensurate with that level of funding. The process was well documented, it felt well researched, and it felt the grant programme covered a lot of bases.

Leeds Council have done a lot to transform the culture industry. This is particularly admirable in the context that we know that councils are not awash in cash and arts and culture are not a statutory provision.

Connecting over a meal (grant)

Jane Duckitt, Community Engagement Worker



The Youth and Family Alliance, known as YAFA, supports young people and families in Upperthorpe, Netherthorpe, and surrounding areas. We are a community hub that offers tailored activities and support to improve the lives of those living within the community. It was originally established by the Yemeni community within Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe, an area of cultural diversity and social deprivation close to Sheffield's city centre.

Community meals supporting women and health

Over the last year, we have been offering a space where women in the community can gather, to learn about budgeting and how to shop more cheaply. The project was originally funded by a cost-of-living grant. One topic covered was cooking on a budget and this led us to produce a community cookbook. The women contributed some of their everyday recipes and we cooked some of the budget meals together.

Our focus on food also includes an awareness of health issues. Diabetes is more prevalent among minority ethnic communities, so community meals are an entry point for talking about food, healthy eating and living with diabetes. Sharing food and culture is a successful way to connect people.

"It's a way of sitting down to eat together and talk together in a warm space."

Engaging in the grant surgery

When the YAFA trustees suggested we should apply for the community meals grant, I wasn't quite sure how they envisaged using the money. I'd seen the application and that there were various possibilities for this funding. I thought that going to the grant surgery might help us look at the options for our organisation.

I attended the grant surgery and spoke to Rob about some of my ideas and we started talking through what we could apply for within this £3000 grant. We were invited to take flyers, photos etc with us of the work we were doing. I took a copy of the women's community cookbook. At the grant surgery it was great to receive feedback on the spot. That meant I could go back and have a discussion with the trustees and talk to them about what they would like to achieve. We then realised that the work that we were doing with women in the community was a really good fit for this grant and it would enable us to continue the work we had started.

“What was also really helpful is that there were other organisations to speak to at the grant surgery.”

I signed up with the South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau and through them I am looking out for further funding opportunities. It was helpful to have Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS) there too. I didn't know at the time, and I might have been put off making the application if I had, but you need a food hygiene certificate to access the grant. But because VAS were there, they were able to say, ‘Well, don't worry about not having the food hygiene certificate, because we can help you with that training’. I have now done the necessary training. We were also able to connect with ShefFood, the community kitchen organisation.



The grant surgery really helped my thinking and to see what was going to be possible for us to do. It enabled me to see that we can apply for this funding to continue our very valuable work with these women. The food focus was perfect for us because it segued from some of what we've been doing through the cost of living funding we had previously.

“After the in-person grant surgery I had conversations with Rob on the phone, just tapping into that relationship that had opened up. It was very useful to have that feeling of being able to give him a call and speak to him because he was a person I had met, not just a name in an office. I was able to flesh out with him how I might put the application together, how to break the budget down for room hire, the cost of the food, the staffing costs, etc. – all the nitty gritty before submitting the application.”

How the grant is going

It is still early days as the funding came into play during Ramadan. We've structured our funding so that we have a shared meal every couple of weeks and do something health related or learn a new skill, during the alternate weeks, still connecting together.

Through Ramadan, when the women were fasting, we got together nevertheless, every second week – not to eat together but to learn to knit. We concentrated on doing things that are mindful during Ramadan. We also made decorations for our Eid party, which was funded by this grant.

The party was amazing. The food that we had was fantastic. We had a Yemeni beehive, which is the most wonderful bread that you can imagine. We shared a wide variety of beautiful food together from the different cultures represented. We had a fabulous time of dancing, and we all went away smiling.

The value of learning from other councils

“It’s really hard to be the first one to do something – you have to be brave – but if you know that someone else has done it before it makes you feel more comfortable.”
– Rob Malyan, Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer

This case study has shown the benefits of conducting grant surgeries as part of a grants’ scheme but more than that, it highlights the value of learning from others who have gone before. The Sheffield team discussed their ideas for the grant surgery with other colleagues and received support in doing so. Learning from the experience of Leeds gave them confidence to do something that we would probably have gone ahead with anyway.

A lot of knowledge sharing between local authorities happens under the radar – because local authorities have to publish what they are doing, many borrow through this mechanism. However, this doesn’t always enable the sharing of what went wrong or what could be improved upon.

“If someone else has tested something out, what can we learn about the advantages or disadvantages? How can I shape it to Leeds City Council?”
– Ann Wishart, Arts Development Manager

A community of practice creates a safe space in which commissioners, grants managers and other public agency staff can have candid conversations about what they learnt and what could be better when taking steps towards Open and Trusting grant-making. We invite anyone who is interested in strengthening their relationships with their funded partners to join our community of practice.