Protocol: Consultation to Identify Research Priorities in UK Charities and Philanthropy

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1. Purpose and background to the consultation about charity and philanthropy research priorities

This protocol

The purpose of this protocol is to set out the aims, objectives and commitments of the consultation process described below, and the basic roles and responsibilities of the partners therein. This protocol will be published, and Charity Futures and Giving Evidence intend to review it with the Advisory Group on at least a quarterly basis, and update it if necessary.

Background to this consultation

- There is an increasing amount of research into charities and philanthropy
- Though both charities and philanthropy are long-established, the academic study of them is nascent. There is therefore an opportunity to ensure that academic research into charities and philanthropy focuses on the issues which are of greatest value to practitioners (charities, funders, donors).
- This protocol is for a consultation with multiple stakeholders - which we believe to be unprecedented in the charity and philanthropy sectors - to solicit input from UK-based charities and donors about research topics which they think are of the highest priorities for researchers.
- This approach – of engaging the intended end-users of research in the process of deciding what should be researched – is new to the charity and philanthropy sectors (as far as we know) but has proven powerful in other sectors in terms of generating research which is more useful to end users.
- The goal is to produce a short list of (10-20) prioritised research topics
- We will publish and disseminate the prioritised list – to researchers and others, aiming for the list to influence the topics which get researched, specifically regarding charity and philanthropy.

2. Aims and objectives of the consultation

The aim of this consultation is to identify the unanswered questions about charities and philanthropy which are considered most important by charities, funders and donors. {To be clear, we are interested in questions about charities not only as they are involved in philanthropy (as recipients of donors' support), but also in terms of their management, governance, effectiveness, etc.}. The reason for doing this is to stimulate research of the type that charities, funders and donors would like to see, and thereby to inform and improve the practice of charities, funders and donors. To be clear, this project does not include *doing* that research: rather, it aims to create a list of priority questions for researchers to research, and sharing it with them.

The consultation will:

- work with UK-based charities, funders and donors, both by soliciting their views, and by involving them in prioritising the unanswered questions. {It is rather unlikely that these groups will suggest fully-formed researchable questions, but rather very likely that they will highlight problems, issues or knowledge gaps, which we will translate into researchable questions.}
- agree by consensus a list of (10-20) priority unanswered questions for research: in other words, topics for research into charities and philanthropy. This list should be useful to academics and other researchers in setting their research agendas.
- publicise the results of the consultation process.

3. Scope of questions in which the consultation is interested

The aim of the consultation project is to seek researchable questions. For example, a question such as 'what is the best charity in Scotland' will be out of scope – even though the answer might be useful to some donors - because it cannot be answered through research because it involves so many value judgments. However, a question such as 'which children's hospice in Scotland is the cheapest per capita' would be in scope.

Areas of admissible questions will include, but are not limited to the following:

Charity	Philanthropy
• Effective mechanisms of management • Management tools, e.g., CRM, finance systems • Methods of recording / measuring outcomes • Pitching for and managing contracts • Roles and values of membership organisations • Handling multiple reporting requirements • Effective mechanisms for safeguarding • HR: recruitment, training, retention • Role and value of celebrity patrons • Ways of hearing and heeding 'beneficiaries' and front-line staff • Ways of assessing and managing risk • What are the different understandings of charitable activity	• Assessing programme costs and effectiveness • Patterns and trends of philanthropic activities • Assessing organisational costs and effectiveness • How to find other donors with shared interests • Reducing costs for grantees and applicants • How to make giving decisions • Methods of collaborating • Ways of supporting charities to improve outcomes • What reporting to ask for (if any)

Fundraising is out of scope, since that topic is relatively well-researched and may well obscure discussion of other topics. This of course does not preclude others doing a separate priority-setting project specifically around fundraising, and this may indeed be useful. {If data about fundraising is submitted to this project despite being out of scope, we would be open to anonymising it and passing it on to others, and / or to publishing it so that others can use it.}

4. The Advisory Group

The consultation will be managed by Giving Evidence and Charity Futures. (Detail on Giving Evidence and Charity Futures is in the appendix.) It is funded by Charity Futures.

The consultation will be overseen and led by an Advisory Group comprising individuals in the following categories. The composition of the Advisory Group will be made public once it is formed.

- Representative/s of operational charities and non-profits
- Representative/s of private donors, and networks of them
- Representative/s of institutional donors, e.g., foundations, local / central government, and networks of them
- Representative/s of researchers and research institutions*

* Researchers will be represented at this level, to advise on the shaping of research questions. However, researchers cannot participate in the prioritisation exercise. This is because they already have other mechanisms to influence the research agenda; and this process is to ensure that the final prioritised research questions are those agreed by operational charities, voluntary organisations, funders and donors.

The Advisory Group will agree the resources, including time and expertise that they will contribute to each stage of the process.

All members of the Advisory Group will be asked to declare conflicts of interest. If these are deemed likely to cause unacceptable bias which would affect the findings of the consultation process, those organisations / individuals will be asked not to participate. Note that conflicts of interest are not just financial (see new guidance from the scientific journal Nature).

5. The characteristics of respondents we will invite to participate

We will invite people in the following groups to participate in the focus groups and online surveys:

- Statutory entity which funds non-profits (e.g., local authority, central government)
- Institutional foundation (either grant-making or 'operating foundation', i.e., foundations which run their own programmes)
- Individual donor, giving at some scale*
- Operational voluntary organisations. This includes both registered and unregistered charities, and social enterprises etc.
- Advisor or advocate of philanthropy
- Corporate foundation

* We define this as having given a single gift of >£1000 in the last 12 months, and/or having given £5000 in total in the last 12 months. This definition is unavoidably arbitrary. We are not seeking input from 'retail' donors (people giving, say, £200 per year in total), even though those people give a great deal, simply (i) for fear of drowning in the number of responses which that might produce and (ii) because they are unlikely to be users of the type of research which this project seeks to influence.

We will not actively seek input from the following types of participant, other than where those individuals are also in one of the categories above:

- 100% academics, since they have other ways to influence the research agenda
- end beneficiaries of charities and voluntary organisations
- policy-makers
- impact investors
- think-tanks

6. The methods which the consultation process will use

This section describes the planned stages through which the consultation process aims to fulfil its objectives. The process is iterative and dependent on the active participation and contribution of various people and organisations. The methods adopted in any stage will be agreed through consultation between the Advisory Group members, guided by the consultation process' aims and objectives.

This process is based on that created and used by the James Lind Alliance (JLA) which works in healthcare, to allow patients affected by particular conditions, their carers and doctors to identify and prioritise unanswered questions for further research. Details about the JLA process can be found in the Guidebook section of the JLA website at www.jla.nihr.ac.uk where examples of the work of other JLA priority-setting projects can also be seen. The JLA has no organisational involvement in the charity and philanthropy consultation.

Process overview:

Stage 1: Getting set up

We will:
- Set up the Advisory Group. Agree its Terms of Reference, schedule its meetings, etc.
- Make any revisions to the protocol and scope based on discussions
- Publicise this process, through press, social media, networks
- Agree the project plan in more detail, e.g., the cities in which to hold focus groups.

Step 2: Request for responses via focus groups

- We will hold focus groups in four to six cities around the UK. These will aim to solicit the kinds of issues, problems and questions which charities, private donors and institutional funders struggle with and would like answered. The focus groups are likely to be 60-90 minutes in duration, subject to more detailed planning. As far as possible, the focus group structure will be the same in each city, so as to ensure consistency of responses.
- Giving Evidence will facilitate them. We will probably not transcribe them but will record them and produce notes and quotes from them.
- We will invite charities and voluntary organisations, private donors and institutional funders through networks in / near those cities, e.g., the membership bodies of charities and support bodies for them (e.g., NCVO, ACEVO, Councils for Voluntary Service), the membership bodies of foundations (e.g., the Association of Charitable Foundations), networks of private donors (e.g., The Funding Network, The Philanthropy Workshop, community foundations)
- We will aim for a mix of charities and voluntary organisations, private donors and institutional funders in each group.
- There will be some 'ground rules' for all participants, e.g., to avoid digressions and instead to focus on identifying research topics; and to deal with the risk of some charities and voluntary organisations taking the opportunity to 'pitch' to funders in the room.

Almost certainly in the focus groups we will need to explain what we mean by an 'unanswered question' - i.e. an issue, problem or known knowledge gap where more research would be useful. We will also ask what (academic) research has been useful to these respondents to date and this will be a chance to see how our stakeholders conceptualise and articulate the notion of researchable questions, and this will help inform the design of the survey.

Step 3: Wider, online request for responses

We will pilot the survey with a few charities and voluntary organisations, private donors and institutional funders for issues of practicality, e.g., to ensure that the terms are correctly understood and that it can be completed in a reasonable time-frame.

We will open the consultation to anybody in the categories listed above. The invitation will be circulated through email distribution lists, social media (notably Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook), press and membership of relevant bodies, including those represented on the Advisory Group. This will enable us to reach a wider range of voices than will be feasible through the focus groups alone.

The survey tool is yet to be decided: possibly it will be on SurveyMonkey. People will be directed to a webpage which will explain the project's purposes and invite them to respond.

Each respondent will be asked for information which will help us assess whether the sample is balanced (and if not, where and how we might need to weight responses) such as age, geographical location, category/ies from the above list into which they belong, and if information is available, across income status. We will not collect data on participants' religious affiliation.

There is a risk of, on the one hand, being overwhelmed by responses, and, on the other hand, having too few responses from people / organisations of particular types. Clearly, both situations can arise at once. To manage this, we may set targets for the number of responses from people / organisations of particular types; and we may also stop collecting responses from some groups when we have enough from their category. This should ensure that the data-set is both balanced and of manageable size.

Step 4: Data assessment

The consultation process will produce "raw" unanswered questions about concerns of charities, private donors and institutional funders: few will be ready-framed as researchable questions.

These raw questions will be assembled and categorised and refined by Giving Evidence into "collated indicative questions" which are clear, addressable by research and understandable. Similar or duplicate questions will be combined where appropriate. Some questions may need re-writing for clarity or concision.

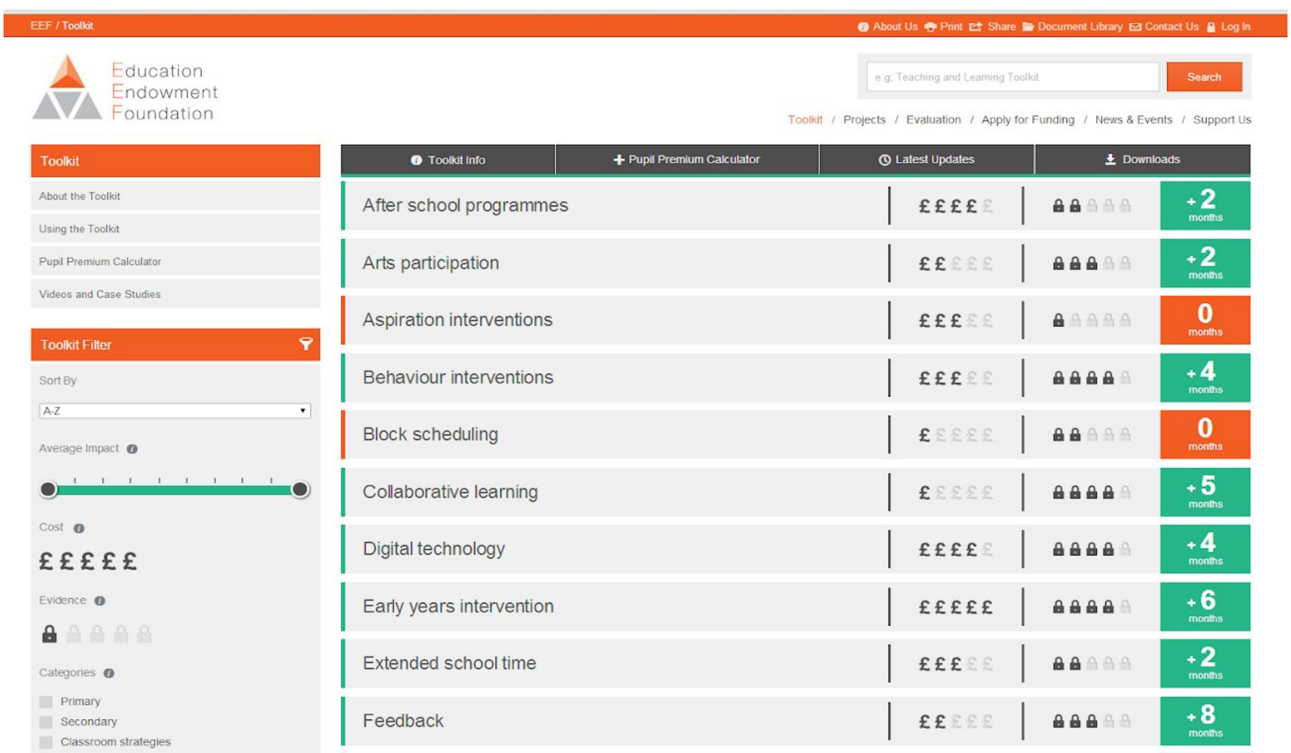
Determining whether questions are unanswered

In medical research, questions can be deemed to be answered if there are robust systematic reviews of multiple sound studies into them. Such systematic reviews are held in well-indexed repositories and hence are relatively straightforward to find.

This is not the case for questions unearthed by this consultation about charities and philanthropy, since few such systematic reviews (or sound underlying studies) exist, and the information architecture is so poor that finding existing material is hard. In charities and philanthropy, some questions are partially answered by existing research; few are answered comprehensively.

Instead, we may need to:

- Set a limited amount of time (say, two hours) per question which a researcher will spend searching for research relevant to that question.
- Present the nature and extent of that research along with the question. This might be analogous to the way that the Education Endowment Foundation's Toolkit shows the strength of research about the various interventions which it has analysed – separate from what that research says (see screenshot below.)



The Advisory Group will need to decide how definitively a question can be researched / answered before it becomes ineligible for the prioritisation process. It is important is to have a transparent and defensible record of how the determination was made about whether a question is answered or not.

The focus groups provide a reconnaissance of what types of issues, knowledge gaps or problems charities & voluntary organisations, private donors and institutional funders are concerned about. After they have finished, and in consultation with relevant members of the Advisory Group, we will decide (i)how we will define ‘unanswered’ (the threshold level of evidence that we mean for a question to be answered), and (ii)the precise process which we will use for ascertaining whether a question is answered.

Questions which are deemed to be ‘unanswered’ (i.e., not adequately addressed by existing research) will be collated and recorded. This will demonstrate the checking undertaken to make sure that the uncertainties have not already been answered.

Of course, we may find that questions which have been raised in focus groups and the survey as unanswered are in fact adequately answered. This will show that the intended users are unaware of that research. Clearly, that is an issue of itself - around poor communication and dissemination of the research. We will report on this, and work with others to find a solution.

This full list of questions at this stage will be published by Charity Futures and / or Giving Evidence on its website on completion of the consultation process, taking into account any changes made at the final workshop, in order to ensure that the results are publicly available and transparent. It is important, for example, that people who submit questions which do not appear on the final short-list can see that their question was received and heard, and can see the stage and reason for their eventual exclusion.

Step 5: Initial Prioritisation

The initial prioritisation will start with the long list of unanswered research questions. It will aim to reduce the long-list to up to 30 unanswered research questions, which will be discussed in the next stage.

The initial prioritisation will be done remotely and online - over email or online (e.g., via SurveyMonkey). The precise process is to be agreed by the Advisory Group. We envisage inviting charities, private donors and institutional funders – through much the same communication channels as were used for soliciting questions.

Normally, this initial prioritization also involves a SurveyMonkey survey, in which participants rank their top 10 most important unanswered questions. Again, we would need to ensure a balance of participants.

Step 6 – interim and final stages

The aim of the final stage of the consultation process is to prioritise through consensus the identified unanswered questions relating to charities and philanthropy. This will be carried out by a smaller group. The Advisory Group, Giving Evidence and Charity Futures will decide on the precise process and composition of this group. It is important that the process for determining participation here is transparent and defensible. One option is to invite people who have been involved in the process thus far.

- The final stage, to reach, 10-20 prioritised unanswered questions, may be conducted through a face-to-face meeting, using group discussions and plenary sessions.
- The methods used for this prioritisation process will be determined by consultation with the Advisory Group and with the advice of Giving Evidence.

Giving Evidence will facilitate this process and ensure transparency, accountability and fairness. Participants will be expected to declare their interests in advance of this meeting.

7. Dissemination of findings

We will publish the results of the consultation process, and proactively distribute them to the charitable sector, funders and researchers. We envisage that organisations involved in this process, and others including academic and non-academic researchers, will use the prioritised list to inform their choice of research questions in future, and reference the prioritised list when approaching funders and when allocating funding for research themselves.

We will publicise the findings through various channels, including:

- Social media,
- Email distribution lists
- Conferences and academic forums
- Sector press, where possible
- Directly to funders of research

Charity Futures and Giving Evidence may capture and publicise the results through descriptive reports of the process itself in plain English. This is different from publishing an academic paper.

Appendix: About Giving Evidence and Charity Futures

Charity Futures is an independent think tank focused on the long term sustainability of charities. We challenge ourselves and others to think more deeply about the future by asking difficult questions, promoting conversation and provoking debate. Our belief is that a strong sector delivers a strong society.

Charity Futures was started in 2016 on the initiative of its Director Sir Stephen Bubb, formerly Chief Executive of the civil society leaders' network ACEVO, in response to the challenges thrown up by several highly publicised episodes involving sector governance and leadership. We work in collaboration with others, and our first joint enterprise was a national trustee survey in 2016 with Third Sector magazine and nfpSynergy. We have hosted a number of large and small events enabling the sector, its supporters and its critical friends to share insight into long term challenges. Publications planned for the summer of 2018 include papers on the behavioural aspects of core costs funding, and the impact on the sector of blockchain technology.

Giving Evidence works to enable *giving* based on sound *evidence*. Our work has two parts: consulting and campaigning. They are closely connected, in that client work often raises, refines or tests ideas on which we campaign. Both draw significantly on how evidence is produced, organised, and used in medicine.

Consulting. We help major donors to use data to select / refine their focus, and improve their operations, both by commissioning and using research, and by integrating evidence into their decision-making processes. We have worked with many types of donor – families, individuals, endowed foundations, companies, fundraising foundations, public sector foundations – in many countries and on many issues over many years.

Campaigning. We speak and write publicly about the problems with evidence in the funding world and about what donors can do to improve it; and we publish new evidence. For example, we: published the first ever *data* (rather than just opinion) in the long-running debate about whether charities should be judged on their admin costs. It was one of The Guardian's most read pieces of the year; published analysis showing that the evidence from the world's first social impact bond ('pay for success' mechanism) won't be robust enough to show whether it's worked or not; and wrote recently in The Economist and Financial Times about how donors could avoid waste and improve performance by sharing more information about their work.

Caroline Fiennes founded Giving Evidence and is one of the few people whose work has featured in both *OK! Magazine* and *Nature*. Now an FT columnist, she worked for several years in commercial strategy consulting, and has 15 years' experience in making non-profits more effective and advising major donors around the world. She has led strategy reviews and analysis for a wide range of foundations, in various continents and on various issues. Caroline was an award-winning charity CEO, and her book *It Ain't What You Give* was described in the press as '*the Freakonomics of the charity sector… a tour de force'.*

Caroline speaks often on TV and radio, has taught at Yale and Cambridge Universities and through TED, and is a prize-winning philanthropy advisor.