



City Bridge Trust

**Location:**

London, United Kingdom

**Annual Grantmaking:**

£20 million

**Year Established:**

1995

**Type of Grantmaker:**

Independent Foundation

**Mission:**

City Bridge Trust works to reduce inequality and grow stronger, more resilient, and thriving communities for a London that serves everyone.

## THE ROAD TO TRANSPARENCY

### Insights from a Top-Performing U.K. Funder

**INTERVIEWEE: TIM WILSON**

Nonprofit and foundation leaders alike tie transparency to the substantive work of foundations and describe it as representing the values of clarity, openness, and honesty. And most foundation CEOs — 86 percent — believe transparency is necessary for building strong relationships with grantees, [Center for Effective Philanthropy \(CEP\) research finds](#). Indeed, CEP finds that grantees that rate their foundation funders as more transparent also perceive their relationships with their funders to be stronger.

Tim Wilson is the funding director & social investment fund manager at City Bridge Trust, an independent grantmaker in the heart of London. When the Trust gathered feedback from its grantees through the [Grantee Perception Report \(GPR\)](#) in 2016, it was rated in the top 40 percent of CEP's overall comparative dataset for transparency, and in the top 20 percent for its processes for selecting grantees.

Since 1995, City Bridge Trust has adopted an approach largely based on public decision-making — meaning that intentional transparency is key. All Trust Committee meetings are open to the public and the Trust publishes all reports, decisions, and papers online. Wilson shares that City Bridge Trust is interested not only in being open and transparent, but also in being accessible, for example by making sure that people can easily find the information they're looking for through databases like [360 Giving](#).

How does City Bridge Trust approach transparency, and what informs that approach? When asked about the meaning of transparency for the Trust — and about the trade-offs the organization faces in practise — Wilson shares several key lessons.

**OPEN UP TO PUBLIC SCRUTINY TO ALLOW FOR BETTER DECISIONS**

According to Wilson, philanthropy is about maximizing the use of limited resources in order to achieve impact. “If you believe in the value of debate and scrutiny of your foundation’s work by others in the sector, and in being open about what it does and why, transparency matters because it allows for intelligent critique of the choices that you’ve made,” Wilson says. For City Bridge Trust, this is the basis for the way they operate: to be clear on what they’re doing, why they’re making the choices they make, and why the strategy is set in the direction it is.



[Transparency] doesn't mean you lose any control; it's just explaining why you make decisions the way you do.

– *Tim Wilson*

Moreover, public recommendations require people to state the facts (and their interpretation of the facts) and exposes personal biases and subjective opinions to public scrutiny, Wilson explains. He believes that being transparent about one's work invites feedback loops that allow people to provide commentary on what a funder does, which in turn leads to a more reflective way of funding.

### ENCOURAGE A MUTUAL LEARNING EXCHANGE

City Bridge Trust is part of a wider system; the Trust doesn't fund in isolation, and networks and learning are an important part of what they do, Wilson says. He believes that the Trust learns more by being open and transparent about what they fund and why. On the one hand, this is because doing so invites feedback and encourages public debate, leading to better decisions. On the other hand, it is because transparency encourages an exchange between funders, whereby more and more foundations share what they deliver and how they work, which in turn leads to mutual learning opportunities.

Wilson also says that "good questions tend to snowball," which motivated the Trust to move from a practice of simply monitoring grants to creating a deliberate impact and learning strategy and department. Wilson's hope is that the Trust can use their learning to engage their partners to hone and refocus their strategy. The only way to enable this is by being transparent and sharing what the Trust is learning, he says.

### BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT FAILURE

"All of our grants involve risk, and we're all trying to do things that haven't been done exactly like that before," Wilson says. "So if things go wrong, that's part of what we'd expect."

However, the Trust is careful not to bring any form of raw data about failures to a wider audience without relevant context or explanation, Wilson says, since omitting such information could potentially harm their grantees or lead to misinterpretation.

In cases where things don't go exactly to plan, the Trust makes sure to understand what has happened and why the results are different from what was expected. They also work to share those lessons learned in a constructive, curated way. "Failure is always a subjective judgement on what happened," Wilson says, so the Trust takes measures to provide commentary on what happened and what they have learned, rather than presenting raw data without any context or explanations.

### KNOW WHY YOU'RE COLLECTING THAT DATA

According to Wilson, when the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) went into effect in May 2018, it forced City Bridge Trust to comprehensively review their processes and the data they held. Beyond being open and transparent, "it was useful to reflect on what sort of things we ask for from our grantees and why," Wilson says.

Foundations sometimes tend to collect information because it might be useful, Wilson explains. For the Trust, the process of aligning its practices with GDPR compliance was a useful exercise of discipline to look at the data they collect and ask themselves why they collect it, what they use it for, why they store it, and who has access to it. The takeaway from this? Transparency encourages feedback and reflection, yet also requires one to think carefully about what data one collects and why.

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Failure is a subjective judgement...You need to explain *why*, rather than present the raw data without any context or explanations.

– Tim Wilson



If you'd like to learn more about understanding and improving your relationships with grantees, including through collecting grantee feedback via the **Grantee Perception Report (GPR)**, contact CEP Manager, Assessment and Advisory Services, **Charlotte Brugman**, who is based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, at [charlotteb@cep.org](mailto:charlotteb@cep.org).



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