

South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau

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Our impact

Funding News - turning bad news into good news

Cuts to our funding meant the end of printed Funding News - but online technology has given it a new lease of life

SYFAB's Funding News has been around for almost twenty years, and throughout its life has been funded to various extents by our local authorities in South Yorkshire. But as the recession began to bite it became clear that we, along with the rest of the third sector, would have to find more cost-effective ways to deliver our services - or risk losing them altogether.

We had already begun to make use of **online technology** alongside the printed version, by launching a blog site to which users could subscribe for RSS feeds and sign up to receive regular emails, automatically generated from the site. We also made a pdf version of the printed newsletter available to download from our website, and set up an email list of subscribers who wanted us to send them a prompt each month when the latest issue was uploaded.



In addition, SYFAB continued to send out 800 printed copies of Funding News to groups requiring a paper version.

These tandem, if slightly complicated systems, ran successfully for a while, but then the blow fell: SYFAB's funding from Sheffield City Council, along with that of many other organisations, was to be cut by 15%. Barnsley MBC's grant to us would not be renewed, and funding from Rotherham MBC was also likely to be reduced.

We knew that one area where we could make savings quickly was the printed Funding News. By switching to a virtual version as the default option, we could save the design and layout costs of each issue, the printing costs of around 800 copies each month, and postage and stationery costs. We talked about this with Sheffield City Council, who supported our plans to go virtual.

We then set to work on streamlining our parallel systems. **We set up an email campaign that would take any new posts from the blog and send them as an email message** once a day. Once we were confident the system was working correctly, we changed the signup forms on our website over to the new system, so that visitors to the website would be able to sign themselves up. The first signup appeared within minutes!

We also combined our various different types of online subscribers onto one system so we can easily send out funding emails to everyone.

Meanwhile we were carrying out the sad task of putting together the final printed issue of Funding News, and making sure everyone was aware of the changes. With each copy we sent a form inviting people to sign up to the email list. Although most people have email and internet access these days, not everyone does, and to avoid excluding the few who don't we asked those people to call us. Online technology has also been able to help our offline subscribers, as we are able to use an online service to create a very plain and simple pdf digest of our blog articles which we can then post out once a month. So far only a very small number of people have requested this service, so although we do still have some distribution costs they are very low.

We also **still produce an audio version** of this digest for those who need it, as we have done for many years for the printed Funding News.

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As we write this in June 2011 the total email mailing list stands at 2,236. This figure is quite dynamic as people make full use of the ability to subscribe, unsubscribe or change their preferences themselves. A recent innovation, in response to a request from one of our subscribers, has been to give people the option of receiving emails weekly rather than daily, and 275 of the list have chosen that so far. The satisfied subscriber subsequently wrote to us:

“SYFAB responded quickly to my request and set up a weekly system which I am already finding so much better given the amount of time I can dedicate to my voluntary work. However, it is not just this that I am writing to say thank you for, rather that **SYFAB responded so positively** to my difficulty. It showed SYFAB to be really flexible to the circumstances of groups who access its funding news services. From this I **feel that you listen to, care about and value those who are supported by your excellent ongoing work.**”

- 150th (Wadsley Church) Scout Group

2010-11 may have seen the end of one of our service delivery methods, but has given us the opportunity to provide a much-improved service to the majority of our users, in a far more cost-effective way.

Sign up for Funding News from SYFAB emails at <http://syfab.org.uk/fundingnews/>

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Online funding search - the advent of a new system

Helping our users to help themselves to funding information

Recently SYFAB experienced the birth of its new Funding Search database. As with most births, it was not without a lot of effort, but in Summer 2009 we were pleased to announce the arrival of **our free, online searchable database of funders**. It holds information about local and national funders that are relevant to voluntary and community organisations in South Yorkshire and after a very simple registration, you can search the database and get instant results.

The database has been a major development for SYFAB and has marked a **fundamental shift in the way that we provide information** for our service users. Instead of us doing funding searches on behalf of groups, we now provide the means for groups to do their own searches online.

Previously, any group wanting a funding search had to contact us by phone or post and give us very detailed information about the project they wanted to fundraise for. Our Information Team would then take this information and research suitable funders for the group using a range of different funding resources. We would collate the information from the various databases we used and send it out to the group by post. This system had been used for many years by SYFAB, and it would take 2-3 weeks from requesting the funding search to actually receiving it in the post.

We noticed that over the years, fewer groups were requesting funding searches from us - despite the quality being very good - and more and more of those who did ask wanted the information faster and would have preferred it to be sent out by email.

We also had our own internal difficulties around how to manage huge amounts of information in ways that made it accessible and searchable and easy to keep up to date. We had been using an array of different databases, both our own and external ones that we paid to have access to. We used them in conjunction with each other to get the best possible information but this was clunky and often frustrating.

We needed a shiny, **new searchable database** that had all the funders relevant to our service users. Once we conceived the idea it was only a small step to realising that we could put it online and enable groups to do their own funding searches.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the SYFAB Funding Search page. The page title is "SYFAB - South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau - Funding Search". The URL in the address bar is "http://fundingsearch.syfab.org.uk/search.aspx". The page features a navigation menu on the left with links for Home, About SYFAB, Information Sheets, Funding News, Funding Search, Development Workers, and Training. The main content area is titled "Funding Search" and includes a search form with several sections: "What areas of work are you fundraising for?" (with checkboxes for various categories like Adult Education, Arts, Children, etc.), "Where does your work take place?" (with radio buttons for location), "Are you a registered charity?" (with radio buttons for Yes/No), "What size of grant are you looking for?" (with radio buttons for grant amounts), and "What type of costs are you fundraising for?" (with checkboxes for Buildings, Core Costs, Equipment, Project Costs, Salaries). A "Search" button is at the bottom of the form, and a "Print Selected" button is below it. The page also includes a footer with contact information and a note about printing.

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We now have **2,200 registered users** and in South Yorkshire, **over 9,800 searches** have been carried out. Compare these figures to the 272 funding searches that were done by SYFAB in 2008 and you'll see the huge difference we've made to groups having access to funding information.

Of course we know that not everyone is confident using the Internet to do a funding search so we have recently begun providing Finding Funders workshops across South Yorkshire, to help those who are new to using our database. These have proved popular and initial feedback has been good, with one user commenting:

"The sections explaining the database and Funding News were both very useful. The workshop exceeded my expectations."

We also know that not everyone has access to a computer so we still provide funding searches for those who need them.

As with all offspring, we can never say that the work is complete. Our labours on the database are ongoing with all the work involved in keeping it up to date. If you haven't tried it for yourself, go to <http://fundingsearch.syfab.org.uk>

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Funding Resources Project - faith in the future

Collaborating with one of our partners brought an additional blessing to this in-depth work

SYFAB has produced **information sheets** for many years - our sheets cover a range of topics to help groups with their fundraising and with the day to day running of their organisation. We also run an **accredited training course**, 'Funding and Fundraising for Community and Voluntary Organisations' when we have the funding in place to do so. We had regularly updated these materials over the years, but they were now in need of a full review and refresh to make sure they were really doing what we and our users needed them to do.

We therefore put together plans for our **Funding Resources Project**. We were successful in our bid to the Abbey Charitable Trust (now Santander Foundation) for funding for the project. This was incredibly useful because it allowed us to dedicate some time to the information sheets, work with professional designers and pay for some freelance work on updating the training course.

We researched and re-wrote the information sheets, making them up-to-date, clearer and easier to understand. Since SYFAB had re-branded, we also needed a new format for the sheets, and we liaised with designers to finalise the new look and get all the new sheets put into it.

On the training course, we focused on the learning outcomes, activities and assessment criteria. We also developed a non-accredited version that can be delivered over a shorter time and we updated and developed a number of short courses.

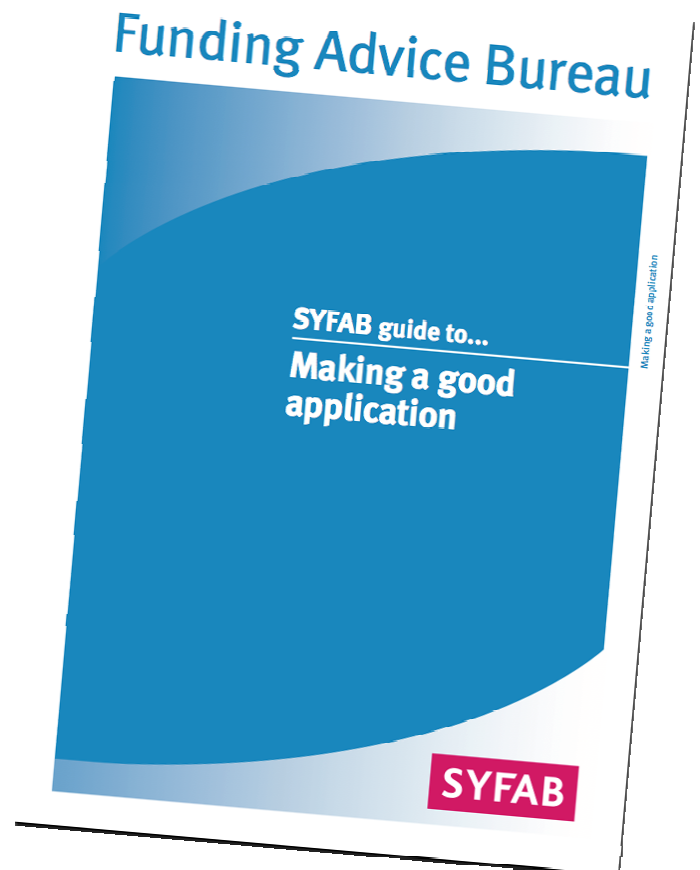
Around the same time, **Together for Regeneration (TfR)** approached us to produce some information sheets jointly with them. TfR were set up to work with community projects in churches and although they now provide organisational and project development support to all voluntary and community groups, they still provide specialist support to faith groups.

We were delighted to have this opportunity - **working collaboratively with other organisations** is something that can provide many mutual benefits. You can build meaningful relationships; learn from each other by **sharing expertise**; reach a wider audience and split the workload.

We worked with TfR's Jennifer Mowat to produce six information sheets aimed at providing clear guidance specifically for faith groups. Initially, SYFAB worked on the ones related to funding and TfR worked on the ones related to organisational development, then we passed the sheets back and forth between us a few times, making amendments and adjustments as necessary. We used Basecamp for this, an online tool that makes collaborative projects like this one much easier.

All the new information sheets are available to download for free on our website. We don't have a specific project that focuses on delivering fundraising training at the moment, but through our restructure, we will be integrating funding learning into all of our services. That will be through traditional face-to-face group training sessions, online training and individual information, advice and guidance support.

Get the sheets at <http://www.syfab.org.uk/infosht.php>



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Consultancy - piloting a new approach

Testing out the mix between free and paid-for services

We were awarded a grant from the Modernisation Fund which we used in early 2010 to develop some **feasibility studies into potential new areas of development** for SYFAB products and services. One of those areas was fundraising consultancy - providing detailed or intensive fundraising support to organisations on a fee-paying basis.

We **piloted fundraising consultancy during 2010-11**, working with a small number of clients on various aspects of fundraising. The main tasks we were asked to take on for organisations were researching and writing funding applications to raise funding for a particular project or set of activities. We also worked on tenders, cases for support and funding strategies.

The groups who commissioned our consultancy support tended to be medium-sized voluntary and community organisations with a small number of paid workers, who had fundraising capacity and skills within the organisation, but not necessarily the time available to actually deliver the fundraising work. This was interesting, since a lot of the focus for our grant-funded funding advice work tends to be on small and new groups without paid workers, rather than these slightly bigger groups looking to develop their organisations.

Overall, it was **an interesting pilot that allowed us to learn a lot about the issues for SYFAB in taking on a consultancy role** and working with clients on that basis. It helped us to focus on some ongoing challenges for SYFAB:

- how should we best allocate our scarce resources - on the scale between offering intensive detailed support to a few groups, and a 'light-touch' service to lots of organisations?
- how do we prioritise the organisations that can access our free grant-funded support services?

In 2011-12, we will continue to explore these issues alongside the development of our new Funding Information Advice and Guidance (FIAG) model. We are aware that **fee-based services like fundraising consultancy may have a role within the package of services SYFAB can offer**. But we need to ensure that all our services fit well together and all work towards our goal of improving the fundraising knowledge, skills and confidence amongst members of voluntary and community organisations.

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SYFAB impact assessment 2010

Background and context

For some time, we have been talking about how we monitor and evaluate our work. We need to regularly produce evidence of the impact of all SYFAB's work on the fundraising capacity of voluntary and community organisations, and manage the practical reality of meeting the monitoring requirements of multiple grant-funded projects.

We identified that we needed to improve the evidence base for the outcomes we achieve. For infrastructure organisations, this is always a challenge - the outcomes that we strive to achieve are improvements in things that are difficult to measure, like organisational capacity, skill levels, and confidence.

The fact remains that we will continue to monitor and report on our various grant-funded projects according to the monitoring schedule and format required by each funder. But a SYFAB-wide impact assessment should allow us to produce much of the raw data and evidence required for all of those reports, as well as giving a much clearer picture of the overall impact of our organisation.

Approach

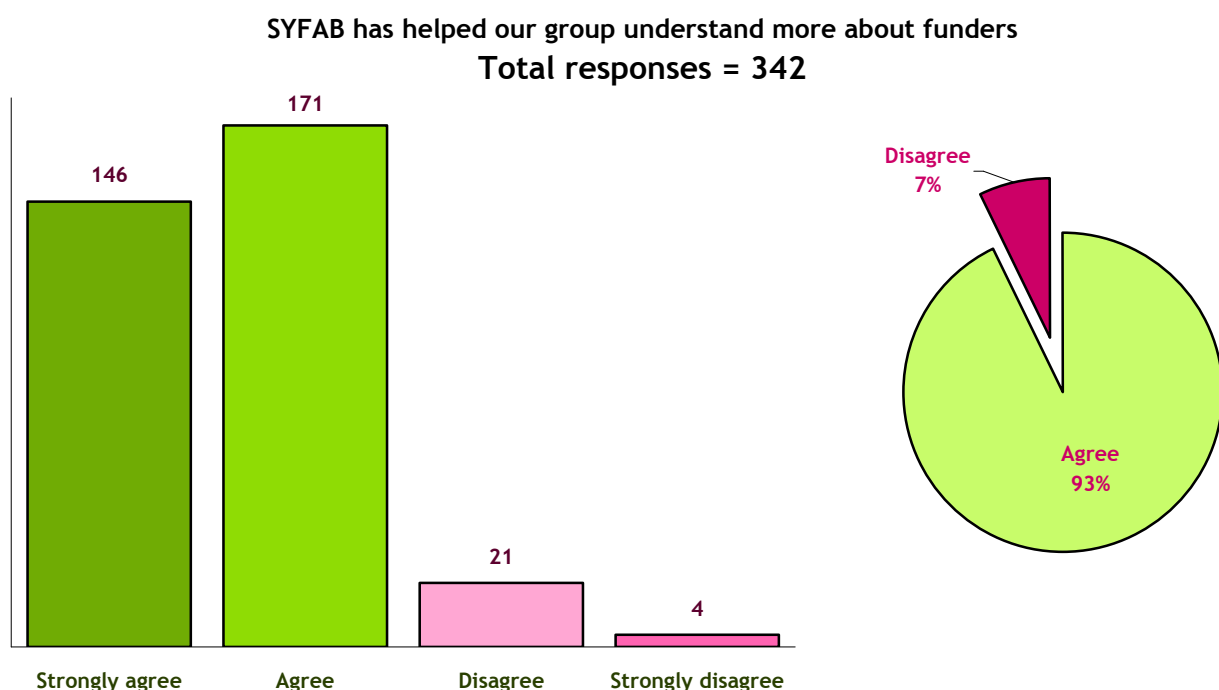
We devised a questionnaire that covered customer satisfaction, overall funding received, and self-assessment of knowledge, skills and confidence in common fundraising tasks. We contacted all organisations that had received some support from SYFAB over the last five years, receiving a total of 444 responses.

We asked some specific questions about the use and usefulness of each service and some about the outcomes of our work - the improvements in fundraising knowledge, skills and confidence that we aim for.

Results and analysis

We asked respondents to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about particular aspects of fundraising knowledge skills and confidence that we try to develop. The following percentages of respondents answered that they 'Agree' or 'Strongly agree' with the following statements:

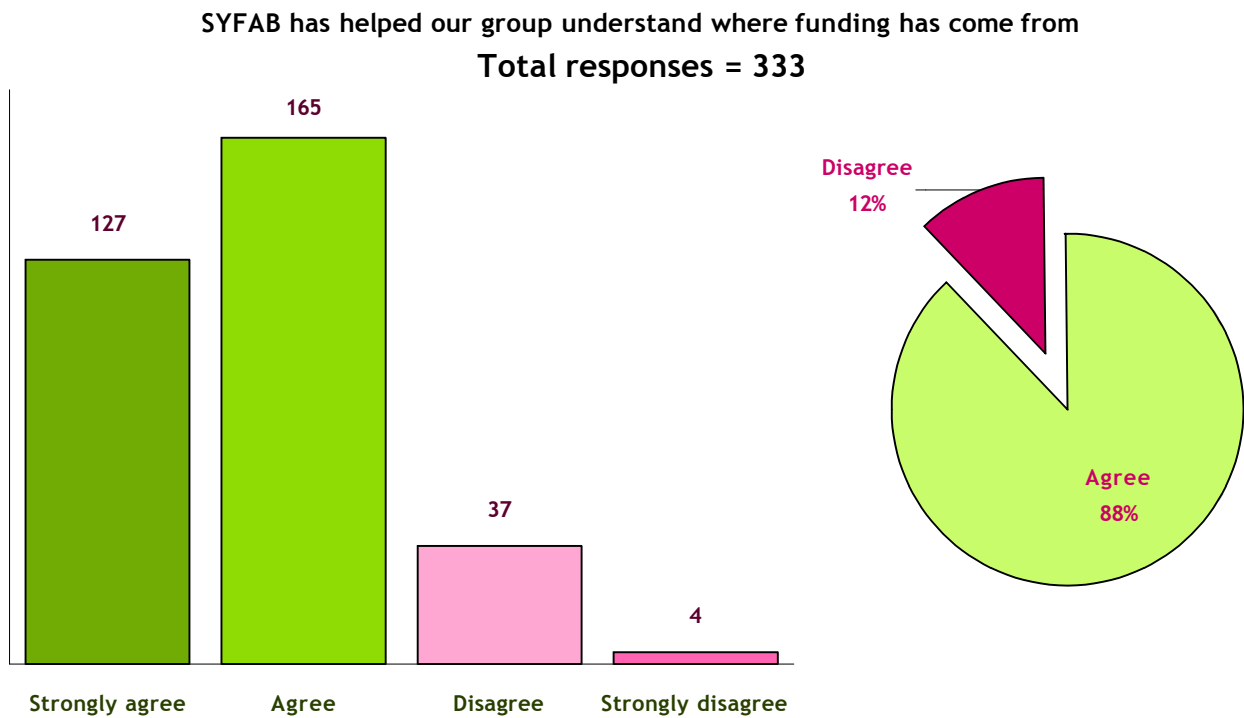
- 93% agreed that "SYFAB has helped our group understand more about funders".



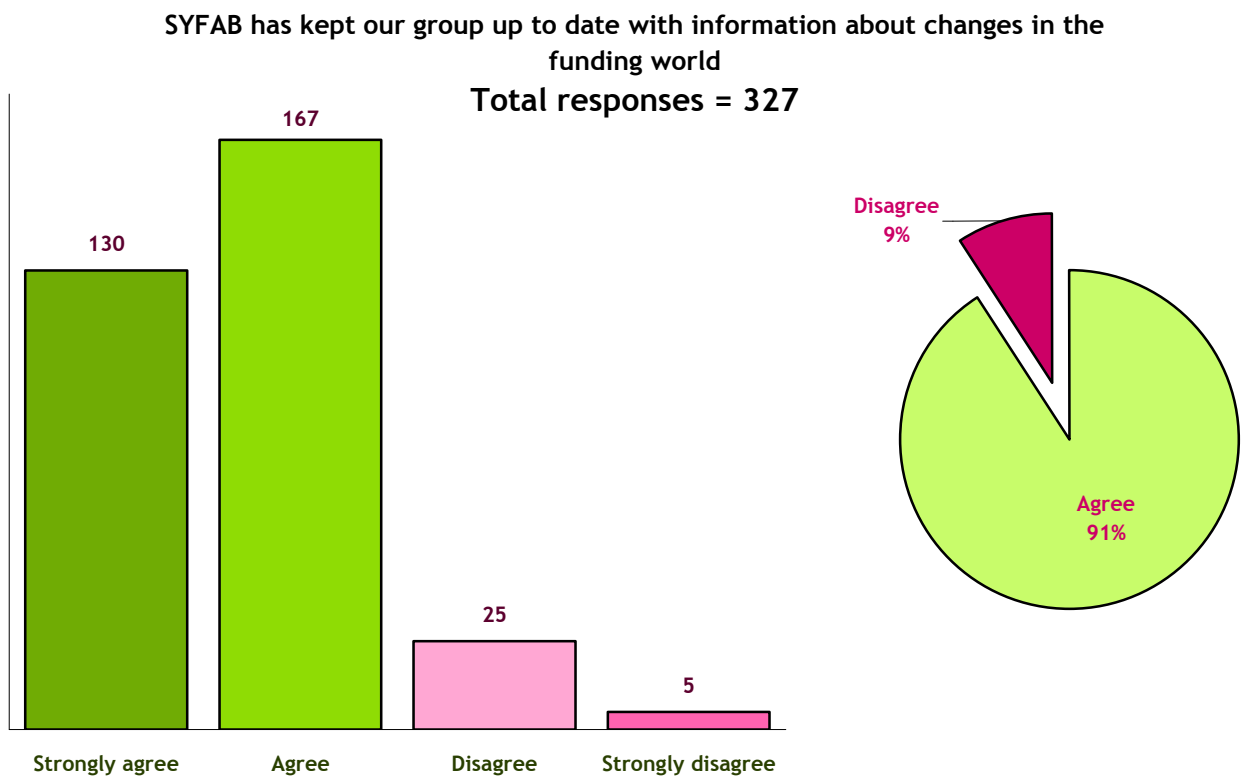
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- 88% agreed that “SYFAB has helped our group understand where funding has come from”.



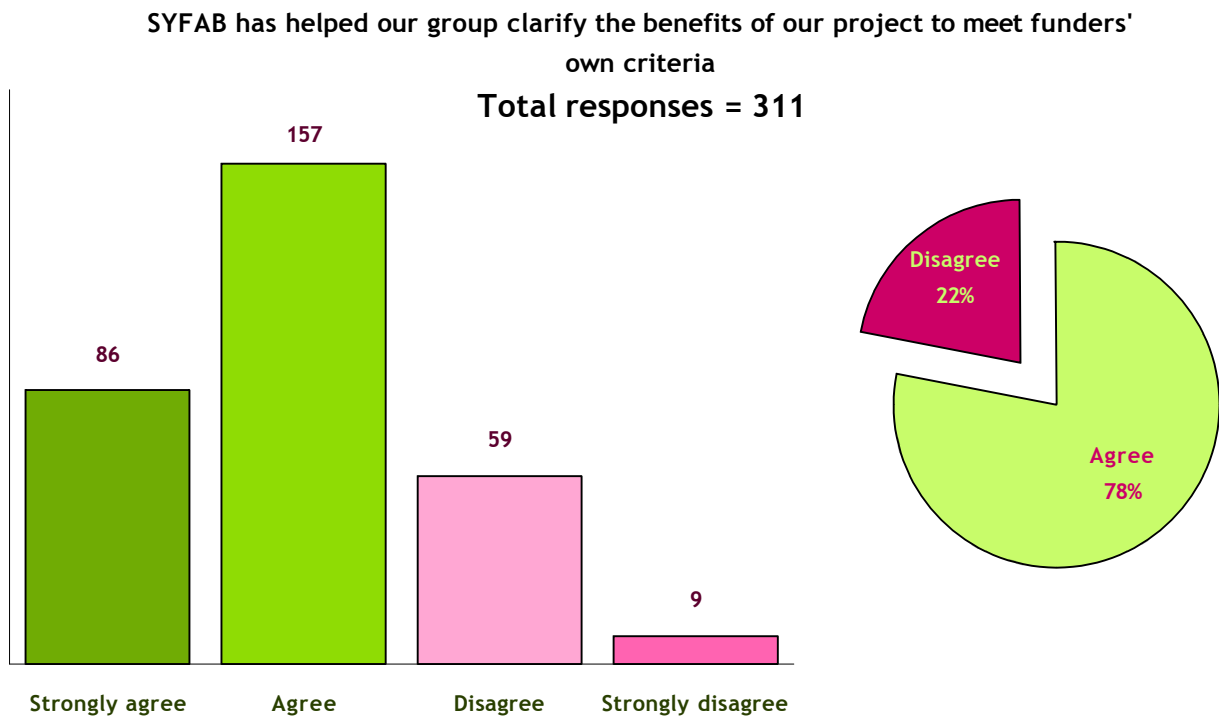
- 91% agreed that “SYFAB has kept our group up to date with information about changes in the funding world”.



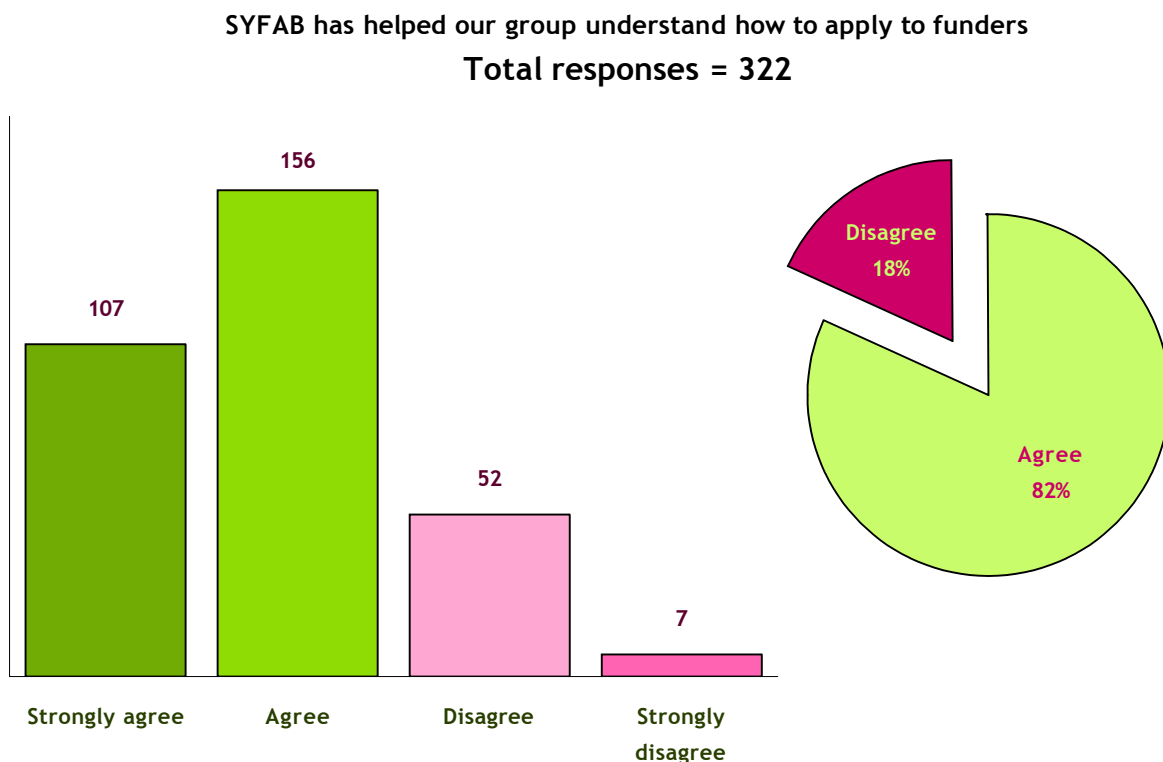
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- 78% agreed that “SYFAB has helped our group clarify the benefits of our project to meet funders’ own criteria”.



- 82% agreed that “SYFAB has helped our group understand how to apply to funders”.

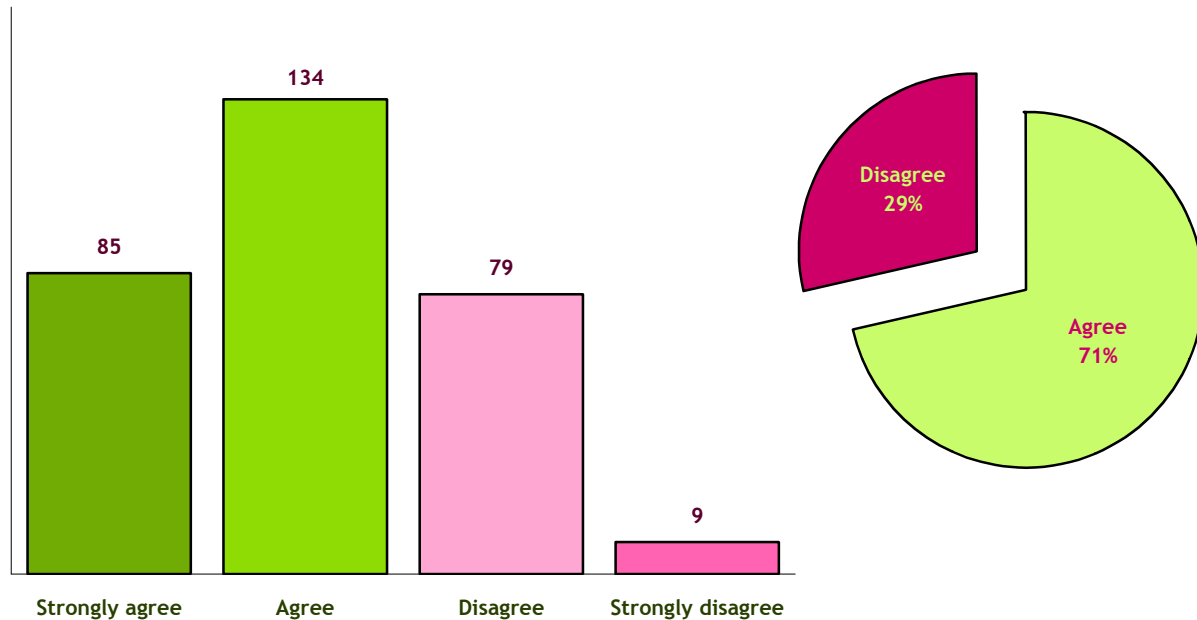


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- 71% agreed that “SYFAB has helped our group know what to write in an application form”.

SYFAB has helped our group know what to write in an application form
Total responses = 307



Those who didn't agree with those statements includes both those who have not received that help/service and those that have but weren't satisfied with it. This was one of the weaknesses of the impact assessment questionnaire design we used in 2010-11 which we plan to improve on in 2011-12.

We expect the percentages to fall as the intensiveness of the service increases - i.e. lots of organisations have benefited from Funding News but fewer have received the benefits of face-to-face development work support. We can tentatively draw the conclusion that an answer of 'strongly disagree' to each statement is likely to indicate dissatisfaction rather than not having used the service. The percentages of respondents expressing strong disagreement (and therefore a presumed dissatisfaction) with the statements are as follows:

- 1% did not think that “SYFAB has helped our group understand more about funders”.
- 1% did not think that “SYFAB has helped our group understand where funding has come from”
- 2% did not think that “SYFAB has kept our group up to date with information about changes in the funding world”.
- 3% did not think that “SYFAB has helped our group clarify the benefits of our project to meet funders own criteria”
- 2% did not think that “SYFAB has helped our group understand how to apply to funders”
- 3% did not think that “SYFAB has helped our group know what to write in an application form”

Although not statistically robust for the reasons stated above, and the inherent limitations of customer surveys such as this, we can draw the conclusion that our services are beneficial on the whole to those VCS organisations that have accessed them. We mainly received positive comments on our work from those surveyed. Those who gave negative comments and who could be identified from their questionnaire were contacted to follow up and see what could have been done better or differently. These comments were almost all due to misunderstandings or misinformation from third parties about what SYFAB could or should do, rather than anything that gave us cause for alarm. For example, the perpetual complaint from a small minority of groups that fundraising is too difficult and SYFAB (or someone else) should just do it for them.

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Everyone who had accessed any particular service was asked to comment on how useful they found it. And all respondents were asked how useful they were likely to find each service in the future. Here's what they said:

- **One to one advice** - 85% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 4% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 69% and 13% respectively.
- **Events** - 74% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 2% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 65% and 7% respectively.
- **Training** - 84% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 2% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 61% and 12% respectively.
- **Funding search (old style)** - 84% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 6% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 76% and 10% respectively.
- **Online funding search** - 78% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 4% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 76% and 6% respectively.
- **Funding News (postal/pdf)** - 75% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 1% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 74% and 4% respectively.
- **Funding News (email/web)** - 79% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 3% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 70% and 6% respectively.
- **Information sheets** - 75% said this was either essential or very helpful, with 2% saying it was not very helpful or no help. For the future the percentages were 67% and 9% respectively.

Again, in each case, there is an ambiguity in the data that is worth unpicking. Those who responded to the question on the current usefulness of the services were just those who had used them, whereas the future question was also answered by those who do not currently use the service. So within that second question, there are people who do currently use each service who are commenting on how useful or otherwise they would find it in the years to come, AND those who do not and are guessing whether they could or would.

Recommendations for 2011 and beyond

We need to iron out the survey design issues from our 2010 impact assessment. We tried to find out a lot of information from a small number of questions which meant that it was sometimes difficult to attribute effect to cause. We also need to design a more automated and systematic way of continuing to measure impact and track users over time, so that monitoring can be done as easily and cost-effectively as possible. Building up a picture of support received and outcomes over time is the key to assessing impact in infrastructure support.

Through our restructure and the establishment of a FIAG team, we are aiming to develop a new initial diagnostic stage that will allow us to benchmark the fundraising knowledge, skills and confidence within organisations we support and then measure progress over time through the annual impact assessment.

We also want to explore the idea of using proxy measurements as well as self-assessment this year - are there any indicators of improvements in fundraising capacity that are easier to measure, e.g. numbers of applications submitted?

We will be working on all those things during the summer of 2011.