

Closing Chapters, Opening Futures: Working with Philanthropy for Better Endings

What is this document?

This is a quick, practical guide for organisations anticipating, planning or delivering an ending, and asking themselves what they can do to maximise the support (financial or otherwise) from their networks of funders.

Introduction - Why does this matter?

At The Decelerator, we hear people say these things very often...though mostly in separate rooms:

Charity Leader: “We’re considering closure, or another type of ending, but aren’t ready to tell our funders.”

Funder: “Too often, we hear about an ending too late to support a smooth transition or play our part in achieving a better ending.”

This matters because impactful endings require leaders and organisations to have ample time, resources, and mental space to maximise the impact — delivering enduring legacies, compassionate support for those affected, and new opportunities for renewal in civil society.

Stakeholders, especially funders, can play a crucial role in ensuring that closures leave a lasting legacy. While The Decelerator is engaged with advocating for the need for larger systemic changes—like policy reform and new funding structures—better organisational endings needn’t wait for such shifts. The reality is that interpersonal relationships and timely, high-quality communication are just as critical in achieving impactful outcomes.

So when an organisation faces the possibility of an ending: closing, merging, CEO succession or discontinuing a program for example - presenting a timely, clear and compelling case to funders is essential.

A few general guidelines for how to engage with your funders:

1. Act Early

- Don’t wait to involve your funders. Reach out early to those you trust most. This opens up more options for support. Don’t wait for absolute clarity on your situation or decision, discussing your decision in a timely manner with funders might well give you useful ‘data’ or information to add to your decision making process, as well as open up opportunities for funder support.

2. Plan Thoughtfully

- Whether you've decided to close a programme or the whole organisation, this is a project like any other. You must create a detailed, costed, impact-focused plan - we've included a brief overview of what it could include below. Outline timelines, resources, and challenges. A well-thought-out plan builds confidence with funders and will ensure you deliver the best possible ending, whatever the limitations of time and resourcing.

3. Be Creative

- Have an open mind and be ready to explore different ways funders can assist with your wind-down, from financial extensions to connecting you with partners or convening a wider sector to assess the losses and make plans to fill gaps going forwards. More on this in the next section...

4. Frame Fund Transfers as Legacy Building

- Position the transfer of remaining funds or projects as a way to extend your organisation's impact. This isn't just an end but a transformation.

5. Reconsider Previously Discounted Funders

- Don't assume a funder who recently turned you down won't help with an ending. Many funders are willing to support a meaningful closure for the sake of the wider sector or the impact of their historic investments.

What can I Expect from Funders?

The Decelerator sees every week how funders can (or should!) play a pivotal role in shaping better endings for organisations, offering both financial and non-financial assistance:

1. Allocate New or Additional Funding

Providing dedicated resources to plan and execute a thoughtful ending is crucial. This could include:

- Interim leadership to manage a wind-down or merger process.
- External consultants or agencies to scope and facilitate a merger.
- Coaching for outgoing CEOs or founders, along with facilitation to guide the wider team or organisation through the transition.
- Hiring external experts to produce a legacy report.

2. Reallocate Existing Funds

Funders can approve the reallocation of unspent project funds to address new priorities tied to a better ending. Examples include:

- Redirecting remaining project costs toward activities like transferring a project to a new host organisation.
- Supporting strategic succession planning for key roles, such as a CEO transition.

3. Offer Non-Financial Support

Beyond financial assistance, funders can help by:

- Convening other funders to collaborate on complex endings, particularly when large budgets or multi-funder involvement is required. This is especially relevant for organisations with sector-wide importance, such as infrastructure bodies.
- Leveraging "Funder Plus" or other capacity-building packages to strengthen an organisation during a critical transition, providing the extra support needed to navigate an ending successfully.

Template Plan: Helping Grantees Make the Case for Funder Support in Endings (Financial and Beyond)

Title: Concept Note for [Ending Type]

Date: [Insert Date]

Prepared by: [Your Organisation's Name]

1. Introduction

Provide a brief overview of the programme or organisation, including its mission, history, and the reasons for its establishment. This section should set the context for why you are writing this concept note.

2. Rationale for Ending / Transformation

Explain the reasons for the decision for the ending (or anticipated decision). Be clear and concise. Possible reasons could include:

- Natural change cycle in an organisation
- Acknowledgment that this organisation/program has fulfilled its mission. Perhaps now is the right time to create opportunities for others to take the lead in this area.
- Financial challenges or business model insecurities
- Lack of sufficient impact or community need
- Changes in the funding landscape
- Strategic shifts in the organisation's focus
- Engagement challenges
- HR or personnel issues

3. Overview of Learnings and Achievements

Highlight the key achievements and impact achieved in the chapter that is coming to an end / might come to an end. This will help build the case for an orderly, funded ending. This can include:

- Number of beneficiaries served
- Specific outcomes or success stories
- Collaborations and partnerships formed
- Lessons learned during the programme's operation

4. Transition / Ending Goals

Outline up to three goals for the ending. For example

- Take care of all people affected by the ending

- Build a lasting legacy through asset transfer or learning dissemination
- Celebrate the contributions through events and communications activities

5. Timeline and Key Activities

All good plans need deadlines and key activities that are anticipated to be required. Endings might be stressful, fast-paced and sometimes feel a bit calamitous, but taking the time to think through the phases of delivery will help funders see you've thought this through and are acting in a way that will make the most of any support they are able to provide.

6. Stakeholder Engagement

Describe how you plan to engage key stakeholders, including:

- Funders: Communicating the decision and discussing future funding possibilities
- Beneficiaries: Ensuring they receive support during the transition
- Staff and volunteers: Managing the emotional and operational aspects of the ending

7. Budget

Provide an overview of the budget required for ending the programme or organisation, including:

- Final budget and financial obligations
- Plans for addressing any outstanding debts or liabilities
- Potential refunds or reallocation of unspent funds

8. Conclusion

Reiterate the commitment to maintaining the integrity of the organisation's mission and ensuring a respectful and supportive transition for all stakeholders involved. Express gratitude for past support from funders and partners.

9. Appendices (if applicable)

Include any supporting documents, such as:

- Detailed budget breakdown
- Timeline for the ending process
- Testimonials from beneficiaries or partners