

Evaluation of the Fundraising Preference Service

Report to the Fundraising Regulator

Executive Summary

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1 Purpose of the evaluation

The Fundraising Regulator is the independent, non-statutory body that regulates all charitable fundraising in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It was established in January 2016 and sets the standards for fundraising in order to protect donors and support the vital work of fundraisers.

Since July 2017, the Fundraising Regulator has operated the Fundraising Preference Service (FPS), a service that allows members of the public to stop direct marketing communications from fundraising organisations registered in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Fundraising Regulator made a commitment to review the service and commissioned Action Planning Consultancy Ltd to undertake an evaluation of the FPS.

The evaluation

The evaluation was undertaken through the following mixed-methods approach:

- **Two surveys:** One for members of the public who have used the service, and the other for charities who have received a suppression request and/or who are registered with the Fundraising Regulator.
- **30 semi-structured interviews** with a wide range of third sector stakeholders (including NCVO, Department for Culture Media and Sport, The Charity Commission, Information Commissioner's Office, Chartered Institute of Fundraising), nine charities and six members of the public.
- **Focus group** with six charities who have received a suppression request.

In total, we consulted with 55 members of the public who have used the FPS (hereafter called FPS users), 172 charities and 14 other stakeholders.

2 Key findings

- When people use the FPS, they are required to select the charities that they wish to stop receiving communications from, rather than having the option to suppress direct marketing from all fundraising organisations. A working group thoroughly investigated the feasibility of the option to suppress all direct marketing from all charities, but this was found by the Fundraising Regulator to be unworkable and not in the public interests. Despite users expressing a strong preference for the option to 'suppress all', the regulator's decision is considered to be a workable compromise.
- The FPS is reliable and easily meets the performance demands placed on it. Users said that the service gave them convenience and peace of mind, particularly when wanting to stop direct marketing from multiple charities. People found the FPS generally easy to use and user satisfaction is high.
- 96% of all requests are made using the website where people can select up to three charities at a time (compared to a maximum of 20 through the telephone service).

Online users interviewed said that they would like to be able to stop receiving direct marketing from more charities in a single transaction.

- FPS allows a user to make a request on behalf of someone else, for example a vulnerable relative. This is a widely used option: 31% of total suppressions since FPS was launched were on behalf of someone else, and in some months, it was over 50%. Most third sector stakeholders interviewed thought that this was the primary benefit of the FPS.

“I am so relieved to know that this exists. It was such a worry to see all the mail coming in and to know that my aunt was sending cash she could ill afford.” (FPS user survey)

- Four out of six users interviewed were accessing the FPS on behalf of someone who had Alzheimer’s and/or dementia and described the distress experienced when they received increasing numbers of direct mail letters. One care worker described seeing her client *“sobbing with his head in his hands”* after receiving five letters in one day and his wife (who has dementia) wanting to donate to all of them. Another generous donor to multiple charities, whose Alzheimer’s had worsened during lockdown, lost track of his giving and was receiving requests for donations almost every week from one organisation. He asked his daughter for help when they had to reduce costs to pay for his care.
- Two FPS users referred to the confusion that direct marketing caused their parent when they thought that they were required to give the suggested donation.
- In some cases the FPS may be the only way that someone can stop a loved one from receiving unwanted direct marketing from charities; almost one in five charities surveyed said that they do not accept requests made directly to them by third parties when the person requesting does not have power of attorney over the supporter’s affairs. We spoke to one concerned carer who was referred to the FPS because the charity refused to stop sending direct marketing to a vulnerable donor when the request was made on their behalf.
- Despite these benefits, usage of the FPS is declining. Awareness is low and the service is not easy to find through an online search about how to stop charity direct marketing. From January to June 2020, the FPS received an average of 36 requests per week from 26 users.
- Charities generally found the charity portal easy to use, although one of the common issues raised by charities was that a large proportion of people who have requested for their data to be suppressed through the FPS are not identifiable on the charity database.
- Charity satisfaction with the FPS is generally low, with only 44% of charities surveyed ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ satisfied with the FPS. Several charities thought that the service was more complex than it needs to be, given the volume of requests coming through the service (it was developed at a time when usage was not known).

- Most charity dissatisfaction relates to the cost of the service compared to the relatively small number of users, which led to almost three quarters of charity respondents saying that they thought the service does not provide good value for money.
- The FPS was set up before the introduction of GDPR, which has strengthened people's data protection rights. Only 25% of charities surveyed thought that there continues to be a need for the service in light of this legislation. Several charity respondents thought the FPS had served its purpose, particularly in the context of declining usage:

*"I would say if you can't bring these costs drastically down then perhaps it's time to close the service due to lack of public demand."
(Charity survey)*

- Despite opposition to the service from many charities, the majority of interviewees with a wider third sector remit argued that the service needed to continue in some form, to maintain and increase public trust and confidence:

"It is an essential part of the system; a vital backstop and a safety net... We, as a sector, would be far weaker without it." (Peter Lewis, Chartered Institute of Fundraising)

3 Conclusions and recommendations

Charitable giving in the UK funds good causes that are the lifeblood of communities here and throughout the globe. The vast majority of fundraisers seek to build lasting relationships with their supporters and carefully consider the impact that their marketing is having on donors when planning fundraising campaigns.

However, fundraising became the focus of intense media scrutiny in 2015 after some high-profile cases that were driven by poor fundraising behaviour revealed people feeling extremely distressed by the volume of direct mail they were receiving. This was described as a *"wake-up call"* for the charity sector and led to the recommendation of a Fundraising Preference Service (FPS) and the set-up of the Fundraising Regulator.

Since 2017, the FPS has provided a convenient way for people to opt-out of receiving communications from multiple charities. There is no doubt that the FPS has protected many people in vulnerable circumstances from receiving unwanted charity marketing.

Despite the declining usage of the service, the need still exists to protect people in vulnerable circumstances from feeling *"overwhelmed"*, *"anxious"* and *"confused"* by the volume of charity direct mail that they are receiving. When circumstances change and charity donors become vulnerable, their loved ones and carers need a quick and easy system to be able to manage communications without having to contact each charity directly, some of whom have indicated that they would not act on the request of a third party in any case.

The reality is that the FPS is an important service for a very small and declining number of users. The FPS was designed when demand was not known, so includes automations and

systems to manage a significantly larger number of users than it is ever likely to encounter. The cost of the system is “*the major bugbear for most charities*” and leads the majority to question its value.

This evaluation finds that the principle of an independent fundraising preference service is an important part of the support structure that helps to maintain public trust and ultimately strengthen fundraising.

We recommend a simpler and more cost-effective solution be developed that focuses primarily on providing a convenient and regulated way for people in vulnerable circumstances (and those acting on their behalf) to opt-out of receiving charity direct marketing. This would also help the Fundraising Regulator to free up additional resources to regulate and champion fundraising as a force for good.

Summary of recommendations for the Fundraising Regulator

1. Seek to significantly reduce the cost of the service by investigating options for a minimal viable set up that is primarily aimed at protecting people in vulnerable circumstances.
2. Consider how to ensure that third party suppression requests made directly to charities are consistently managed and adhered to when there is reason to believe that the supporter is in vulnerable circumstances.
3. Investigate the feasibility of telling charities when the request has been made on behalf of a third party and include an optional text box that allows FPS users to inform charities why the request has been made.
4. Encourage charities and others to promote the FPS to people in vulnerable circumstances.
5. Increase the number of suppressions that can be made in a single online transaction to 10.
6. Issue guidance to charities about what to do if they receive a suppression request via FPS from someone who isn't on their database.
7. Focus the regulator's limited marketing budget on ensuring that the service can be found when someone is looking for a way to stop charity marketing, rather than by seeking to raise awareness amongst the general population.
8. Develop a more visible information page about the FPS that outlines what the service does and does not do. This could include general advice on 'how to stop charity mail' to help boost search rankings.
9. Provide clearer information to the public about how and when to raise a complaint with the regulator if they think that their data may have been sold or swapped by a charity.