

What makes a good trustee

Did you know that there are over 165,000 charities in England and Wales? Each of those charities will have a board of trustees which means there are approximately 900,000 charity trustees in England and Wales. (Figures from The Charity Commission 2008).

So first of all, what is a trustee?

A trustee is an unpaid volunteer who has responsibility to guide the organisation and ensure it stays true to its original vision and has a clear strategy. They also ensure the organisation complies with all the rules and legal obligations that are necessary.

When is a trustee not a trustee?

Some trustees aren't called trustees at all. They can be:

- Members of the Committee
- Management Committee Members
- Directors
- Council Members
- Executive Committee Members
- Governors

However, whatever the name, if the governing body of a charity has voting members, they are the trustees.

Who can be a trustee?

There are some exclusions - where people are legally barred from becoming a charity trustee. These include:

- anyone under the age of 18 (unless it is an incorporated organisation),
- anybody who is bankrupt or is the subject of a bankruptcy restriction order,
- anyone with a conviction for an offence involving dishonesty or deception,
- anyone previously removed from trusteeship by the courts or by the charity

Further information can be found from The Charity Commission.

What do trustees do?

Being a trustee is a responsible position requiring an active role in the governance of the organisation. You will take decisions about the future of the organisation, support the senior worker or Chief Executive, ensure everything is kept legal and of course, ensure the work of the charity continues and that the charitable objectives are met.

It is also important to stay up to date with regulations and charity law.

So again, what makes a good trustee

If you can set aside personal interests and act as part of a group and if you can keep sight of why you are doing the work you are nearly there.

Can you bring a sense of duty, leadership, exercise judgment and be open minded?

You don't have to be an expert on everything, but know what you don't know and consult the experts if you need to.

Professional skills are invaluable. Skills such as fundraising and marketing or accountancy will always be welcome, but a good trustee will also bring soft skills to the board. It is just as important to have those who will support others, and perhaps raise a smile as it is to have accountants or professional qualifications on the board. A knowledge of the community, can be useful as can energy and enthusiasm.

Are you interested yet?

A recent survey showed that 93% of charities have vacancies for between 1 and 5 trustees. Yet a Charity Commission survey showed that 81% of charities use word of mouth and networking to fill their trustee vacancies.

It doesn't take much to realise that something isn't working there. However, there are places to go to find trustee vacancies:

www.vistajobs.org.uk

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

www.volunteering.org.uk

Your local volunteer centre will also help you.

There are also organisations to support boards of trustees:

www.vistaproject.org.uk/governance

<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/>

www.charity-commission.gov.uk

Vista have produced a Resource Pack specifically for trustees of charities. Copies can be downloaded from the website.

<http://governance.vistaproject.org.uk/>

We also have podcasts on the governance page, giving help and guidance to trustees.

Vista can also offer a mentoring scheme for trustees and committee members. It is a confidential, individual support service offering trustees or committee members mentoring and coaching. We have a team of volunteer mentors who have been selected for their wide range of experience and expertise in relation to governing and managing in the voluntary sector.

If you would like to find out more, please contact Sonia (sonia@vistaproject.org.uk) or Laura (laura@vistaproject.org.uk).