

trustee networks

Charity Trustees are important people. Strong, capable trustees, who understand their roles and execute them well, can enhance the overall performance of a charity. Less able trustees who may be confused about their role, lack confidence, or have insufficient knowledge, can hold a charity back, preventing it from reaching its true potential.

Charity Trustee Networks promotes the effectiveness of charities by enabling the sharing of expertise, and information. It achieves this by helping trustees establish networks which they can use for peer-to-peer consultancy and mentoring.

Set up in 1998 by a group of trustees who themselves had benefited from networking, Charity Trustee Networks undertook an evaluation of four of the existing networks at the end of 2002. Its purpose was to provide an understanding of achievements so far, and help Charity Trustee Networks develop strategic advice and support services for those wanting to set up networks.

This document is a summary of the findings of that research.

Background to the research

The research involved studying in detail four networks, each with their own characteristics. Every member of each network was sent a questionnaire, and individual trustees from each network were interviewed.

These networks were;

- Hampshire Chairs' Forum. 88 members. Administered by Community Action Hampshire. Has own steering group
- West Midlands Charity Trustees Forum. 120 members. Has its own office and a part-time member of staff
- Rugby Trustees Forum. 20 members. Established for less than a year at the time of the research, the newest network in the research group
- The Forum of Chairmen of Independent Hospices. 140 of the 180 chairs of voluntary hospices are members. Has a nationwide remit

Charity Trustee Networks: An Evaluation



“The Forum has been very helpful in terms of personal support and in what I have learnt. It is good to talk to other people who have been through a particular situation and learn from their experience.

I now feel much more confident if I have a point to make, as well as more informed.”

EVA ALDRIDGE
Chair, Age Concern Rugby

Eva was a founder member of the Rugby Trustees Forum.

Networks promote better governance

Trustee networks really do work. Eighty percent of respondents to the research said that participating in a trustee network had improved their ability to govern their organisation. This finding was consistent across all four networks involved in the research, and was not dependent on geographical location, size of network, constituency served or any other factor.

Benefits of membership

A large number of benefits of membership of a trustee network were cited by those involved in the research. More than half of all those questioned cited the following as benefits they had experienced;

- improved understanding of the voluntary sector
- building a network of contacts
- increased knowledge of legal responsibilities
- improved ability to carry out my role
- better understanding of my role
- increased confidence as a trustee
- greater feeling of being supported in my role
- better understanding of constitutional issues

Isolation and sharing

Being part of a trustee network can bring a wide array of benefits to any charity trustee. Trustees can often feel isolated. Even in situations where all trustees within a charity regularly meet and discuss the issues that matter to them, there may be particular responsibilities which only one trustee holds, or an understanding of an issue important to many which is partial rather than rounded. The research shows that, as in so many walks of life, trustees can find meeting with others with similar but not identical roles and experience a real boon.

Legal responsibilities and the policy landscape

Trustees have legal responsibilities which must be met. Many interviewees indicated that participation in a network helped them to feel fully briefed on legal matters, including their responsibilities. Sharing information with other trustees, and benefiting from expert speakers attending networks was seen as a good way to develop and maintain knowledge.

Many charities operate within a complex policy landscape, and keeping up with it can be difficult and time consuming. The research found that network membership helped trustees keep up to date by discussing key issues with colleagues.

Effecting change

The research shows that charities whose trustees participate in networks initiate changes in the way governance boards operate.

One third of network members involved in the research described concrete changes they had made within their organisations. These changes were made as a result of their participation in networks. They covered a wide range of areas including;

- creating a trustee pack
- introducing appraisal for the Chief Officer
- introducing a new committee structure
- initiating an internal audit
- improving monitoring systems
- improving staff contracts
- formulating trustee liability protection policies
- introducing a quality system
- accessing new funding sources

Building confidence

Many of those interviewed during the course of the research indicated that the increased access to information and to helpful colleagues which network membership provides had a general effect of boosting confidence. This helps make trustees more able to constructively challenge within their own organisation. Working together for the best outcome often relies on constructive criticism of ideas put forward, so the greater good of the organisation is served.

Access to expertise

Those involved in the research often indicated that the contact they had with trustees from other organisations helped them build up a network of informal contacts, which they were then able to call upon for advice and support on a wide range of issues. These might range from technical, legal and policy matters, to more sensitive issues such as managing conflict situations or appraising Chief Officer performance.



“One of the things that really makes a difference to me is that I can always turn to the Forum for help and say ‘what exactly does this mean?’ There is a large fount of knowledge in the Forum that one can tap into and I now know that if I am unsure as to the answer, there is usually somebody that I can ask.”

DOREEN PARKINSON
Honorary Treasurer

Doreen has been involved in the West Midlands Charity Trustees Forum since its beginnings.



"It is of great benefit to be able to call on people in the same position as yourself and learn from their experiences. Talking a problem through with others really helps one's confidence in dealing with the issue."

MARTIN EDSALL

**Chair,
Thames Valley Hospice**

Martin is a member of the Forum of Chairmen of Independent Hospices.

This is a summary of an independently researched report produced by Joy Mckeith Consultancy and Coaching
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Charity Trustee Networks works with and has the support of a number of key charity and voluntary sector bodies including the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations, the Charity Commission, Charity Finance Directors Group, Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations, the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations

Size doesn't matter

The research involved looking at networks of varying sizes. It found that effective networks did not have to be large ones. Even relatively small networks can have an impact on a significant number of trustees, and therefore on a considerable number of organisations. As well as the direct impact that network membership can have, members can share their new knowledge within their charity, and their fellow trustees can then often share it more widely, creating a 'cascading' effect.

Networks are cost effective

The benefits that networking can have for trustees are made abundantly clear by this research. Moreover, these benefits do not have to require huge financial outlay. The exercise shows that networks do not have to be expensive to run. Indeed, they can be very cost effective, particularly when they are run as part of the work of an existing organisation.

In summary

The research carried out by Charity Trustee Networks shows that;

- peer to peer consultancy and mentoring are learning methods appreciated by trustees
- membership of a trustee network can improve a trustee's ability to govern
- network membership helps break trustee isolation
- trustees find network membership can boost their confidence
- network members can keep each other up to date with the policy and legal context within which they work
- network members feel they have an improved understanding of their role as a trustee
- network members use their knowledge to implement positive changes within their organisations
- network members use each other for peer to peer mentoring and support

To learn more about the work of Charity Trustee Networks, or to obtain a full copy of the report please contact
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