Role of trustees

While businesses are run by executive boards of paid staff, responsible for ensuring strategic direction and performance, in charities this work is carried out by a group of volunteers, called a trustee board, who are almost always unpaid.

Trustees can also be referred to as directors, governors or committee members. They have, and must accept, ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of a charity, and ensuring that it is solvent, well-run, and meeting the needs for which it has been set up.

It is possible for trustees to be paid. But the charity has to include this in its constitution and get the Charity Commission to agree.

Trustee numbers

An estimated 850,000 people in the UK volunteer for a total of 950,000 trustee board roles between them.³

Just over one in seven (15%) registered charities reported that they had an insufficient number of trustees and management committee members in 2010.⁴

More trustee facts

• In charities that employ staff, the most senior member staff typically reports to the chair of trustees.

• The Charity Commission has power to suspend or remove trustees or disqualify people from becoming trustees if they are found to have been responsible for, or aware of, any misconduct or mismanagement at a charity.

• You can find the names of the trustees for any charity using its entry on the Charity Commission register.

³NCVO, Charity Commission
⁴Office for Civil Society (2010) National survey of charities and social enterprises (NSCSE)
Who can be a Trustee?

Trustees must be 18 (or 16 for some types of charity) and they need to be formally appointed to the role.

There are some legal reasons why you can’t be a trustee, including having certain unspent criminal convictions, being disqualified as a company director, or if you’ve previously been removed from a trustee role by the Charity Commission, or a court, because of misconduct or mismanagement.

Those legal reasons aside, most people can become a trustee. It’s a rewarding way to make a difference to a cause you care about, and can be a good way to develop your own skills.