Becoming a trustee

Charity trustees play an important role in making sure a charity is run in the interests of the people it is there to support. They strategically oversee the management and administration of the organisation.

Trustees ensure their charity has a clear strategy, and that its work and goals are in line with its vision. A trustee's role in a charity is to be the 'guardians of purpose', making sure that all decisions put the needs of the beneficiaries first.

They safeguard the charity's assets – both physical assets, including property, and intangible ones, such as its reputation. They make sure these are used well and that the charity is run sustainably.

Trustees don't usually do the day-to-day running of the charity. They delegate this to the staff, led by the Chief Executive. Instead, they play the role of a 'critical friend' to the Chief Executive by giving support and by challenging – in a supportive way – to help them manage effectively. However, in smaller charities with few staff, trustees may take hands-on roles too.

Most trustee boards meet four to eight times a year. Many boards have sub-committees that focus on particular areas of work or projects. Where they do, trustees are often expected to get involved with one or more sub-committees, as well as having a good understanding of their charity's work overall.

You can read more in the Charity Commission's guide, The Essential Trustee.

Why become a trustee?

It is estimated that almost half of all charities are looking for trustees at any time, so you will be filling a vital role in the voluntary sector.

Being a trustee can be very rewarding. As a trustee you have the chance to support and shape the work and strategic direction of an organisation, and you can make a significant difference to a cause that matters to you.

You may choose to get involved with a charity focused on a cause or an issue you are passionate about or because your life has been touched by the work of that voluntary organisation. It is also a great way to get involved in a community or find out more about the not-for-profit sector.

Being a trustee offers the opportunity for professional development. It can let you gain experience of strategy and leadership, and boost your CV. It will give you experience of being a non-executive director, such as setting a strategic vision, influencing and negotiation, and managing risk. If you already have significant experience in these areas, it can be stimulating to use it in a different and potentially challenging context. Trustees often say that being a board member has been one the richest sources of learning in their professional lives.

As a trustee, you are part of a team and will have the opportunity to apply your unique skills and experience while learning from others. Working closely with a passionate team of people who have different perspectives is often one of the most enjoyable aspects of the role.

How much time does it take?

Each organisation will expect its trustees to spend a different amount of time on the role. The only way to find out is to ask the charity.

It is important to be realistic about how much time you can commit, and when, to the potential role. The charity's needs are likely to be made up of a range of activities that may occur at different times of the day and vary across the year. Questions you could ask include:

- How many trustee meetings are there each year?
- How long are the meetings, where and at what time of day?
- Are trustees expected to serve on committees?
- What opportunities are there to spend time with the organisation observing its work, both when joining and on an ongoing basis?
- What contact is there in between trustee meetings and how does this usually take place?
- Are there any one-off events or annual occasions that trustees are expected, or will have the opportunity, to attend?
- What induction and training will the organisation provide, and how much time will that take?

Find trustee vacancies in Kent and Medway through the Kent Volunteers website

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