

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Whose Board? Whose Agenda?

Including disabled and deaf people in your management committees

The last few years have been historic for disabled and deaf people. After decades of lobbying, campaigning and direct action, there is legislation in the UK and Ireland to underpin disabled people's right to equal access. This briefing is a short 'rough' guide to including disabled and deaf people on your board, management committee or advisory group.

Why do we need this briefing?

Our society is undergoing an unprecedented period of change: technological advances are transforming the way we communicate, and access to fast and accurate information is becoming a right, not a privilege. We have started to move away from traditional models of decision making and, as a result, a new climate is emerging for us all.

Only one in ten (11 per cent) of 'managers and senior officials' in Britain are disabled people.

Labour Force Survey

Diversity is an important component of the new structures that are emerging, not least in the realms of governance, and not only from a representational perspective, but also in terms of making effective decisions at a strategic level. Disabled board members have useful experiences and alternative views to share on the social impact of their impairment, and, more importantly, they also have an array of other qualities and knowledge that your organisation can benefit from. Additionally, it is only right and proper that disabled people are present as trustees, as arts and cultural organisations exist for 'public benefit' and disabled people are as much a part of the 'public' as their non-disabled counterparts.

The arts and cultural sector prides itself on being innovative, and its strength lies in its ability to bring people together to celebrate, to learn from one another and to see the world and society through the experiences of others. We should be particularly capable of adapting to changes in society and

encouraging and enabling our management and decision-making structures to help with the process.

A. Are you ready?

The task of appointing and retaining disabled and deaf trustees should not worry you – chances are you already have the skills and experience since the process of appointing and retaining disabled and deaf trustees is in essence not very different to that of non-disabled people.

Additionally, there is already plenty of written guidance on recruitment in general and of disabled people, and whilst most of it refers specifically to employment practice, this advice and experience is very usefully and easily transferable to the task of finding and appointing disabled and deaf trustees. VAN also has two general briefings on the subject, and whilst not specifically for trustees or disabled people, these documents will give you further ideas on creating an effective recruitment process. (see *Further Resources for more information*)

Before you start, it is important to assess the reason for wanting to recruit disabled and deaf trustees, what is already in place and what needs to be improved or implemented.

I. Ask yourself some key questions

- **Are there any other disabled or deaf people on your board already?** Have you consulted with them and discussed your recruitment strategy?
- **Has everyone on the board agreed to this action plan or strategy?** We are all human and sometimes change can be difficult for any organisation. Bringing new trustees into an established group of people can be challenging (be they disabled or non-disabled).
- **Are other people in the organisation aware of the strategy?** Other senior staff and board members must be informed, and they must understand and sign up to the strategy. There is a true story of a very senior disabled person arriving at a theatre for their first board meeting and being shown into a youth theatre rehearsal! Prior communication, trust and respect are vital.
- **Equality or disability equality training** – has your board, or board and staff team, had any training around access,



disability or equality? You might want to consider either arranging for the whole board, or the chair and nominated board members and staff to attend a short course.

- **External support** – do you and your board feel as though you have the skills and confidence to implement the recruitment process on your own? Some boards employ an external consultant to assist them in the process.
- **How do you conduct your meetings?** Do you use a lot of shorthand language? How is information prepared? How much time do trustees have to read papers? Where physically is the meeting held? What time of day is the meeting? These practical matters may create a feeling of insecurity for people and need to be adjusted.
- **Organisational policy** – as a charity your trustees are volunteers. Do you have a trustee handbook which outlines how your organisation deals with trustees and what they can expect? Does your volunteer policy include specific information for trustees or is this covered elsewhere, e.g. in the handbook? Are these documents easily available and accessible to applicants?

In London only 2 per cent of all board membership of arts and cultural organisations are disabled or deaf.

Mayors Office Report 2006: Disability and Culture

2. Bear the following in mind

- **Building a relationship** – historically, many disabled and deaf people have been excluded from education, volunteering and other leisure and social activities. Society is changing, but you will need to build confidence with individuals. Whilst you might experience some underlying fear from people in your organisation about ‘getting it right’, the same exists for those disabled people interested in joining you. They also want to ‘get it right’ or ‘make the right impression’.
- **Think logically** – the skills for management and governance can be gained from a variety of sources – not all your trustees need to have a first-class degree from Cambridge!
- **Offer training** – within your recruitment material make sure you state that you are willing to offer training and support. This could encourage disabled people who are new to the sector and new to management.

B. Finding applicants

So where are all these disabled people? To answer this question simply, they are in exactly the same places as non-disabled people! However, there might be a few extra places you can try. Just remember to try these *in addition* to those you would ‘normally’ try.

- **Local organisations of disabled and deaf people** – generally each town, city or borough has an organisation of disabled people. Think about developing a partnership with

these organisations for recruitment and other supportive activities. They will have useful contacts as well as newsletters in which you can advertise, or notice boards where you can display material.

- **Adverts in disability-related press/newsletters** – the specialist disability press is a useful place to advertise and is being used more and more for the recruitment of trustees.
- **Charities** – lots of national, local and regional charities run facilities for disabled people e.g. Deaf Clubs, or run supported housing schemes or schemes to help disabled people into work. They are usually very willing to distribute information on your behalf.
- **Corporate sector employee groups** – with the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act and Corporate Social Responsibility, many companies have networks of disabled employees. Some of these networks support volunteering and professional development by their members in the community.
- **Grow your own** – in the longer term, it may be useful to involve disabled people in other areas of your organisation at an earlier stage in their career or interest. For example, this could be as members of an access group or user focus group. They could then progress to membership of your board – which would be of benefit to both them and your organisation.
- **Share with other organisations** – keep an eye out or ask around for others who might be embarking on a similar recruitment campaign. Contact them and see if they would be willing to meet and share resources and experiences.

Under current equality legislation, as a charity there is nothing to stop you from advertising for disabled and deaf people. Essentially this can be seen as positive action to redress historic lack of access to education and training for this community.

C. Recruiting and inducting

1. **Skills audit** – consider what skills, competencies and experience you currently have on your board and what you are looking for. Marketing, financial, artistic? Don’t be afraid to audit and ask for skills around access, equality and inclusion.
2. **Create a job description** – i.e. a simple summary of what is expected of a person as a board member or trustee – purpose, scope, tasks and responsibilities. This will help both of you clearly assess suitability for the post.
3. **Information for applicants** – as with any recruitment process you will need to have a recruitment pack. This should contain:
 - **Job description and information about the role** – what type of person are you looking for? What skills (from your skills audit), time commitment, etc. is needed?
 - **Information about your organisation** – basic statistics about your organisation, your publicity material, maybe DVDs of past work, your policies etc. Where appropriate you might want to mention your



work around the various equality issues including disabled and deaf people.

- **Biographies of other trustees** – and, where appropriate, whether any existing trustees are disabled or deaf.
 - **Access statement** – here you should add in what support and resources you are able to offer to support an individual's access requirements.
 - **How applicants apply** – you may decide that applicants simply need to submit a CV and covering letter or you may prefer they complete an application form. If the latter, you will need to make this straightforward and directly relevant to the position.
 - **Monitoring form** – you might want this for your records and your funders. It should be the standard organisational recruitment form and cover information for monitoring purposes only (i.e. for compliance with legal requirements and codes of practice on race, sex, disability, age discrimination), clearly marked for this purpose and be a separate or detachable sheet.
- 4. Recruitment process** – it is vital to ensure that processes for selecting and interviewing are not biased, and adhere to equal opportunities law. If in doubt, seek help from the equal opportunities organisations listed in the *Further Resources* section of this briefing.
- You must also ensure that the interview itself is fully accessible. Please remember to ask applicants for their access needs in their submission and when inviting people for interview confirm these once again. Your interview panel should have had disability equality training prior to interviewing and will be aware of access needs.
- 5. Induction** – time and energy should always be given to inducting a new board member. It may be necessary to take some additional time to review access issues and to contract additional support staff. Time should also be timetabled in between the induction and the first meeting to allow for reflection, questions, comments or feedback.

Regular review meetings should take place between the new board member and chair to assess progress and involvement. Similar to a job interview, the question of access should be considered (clearly expressed in terms outside of the disabled person's board role).

D. Making sure everything is accessible

Good access is simply about logic, planning and communication. If at any stage you do not feel confident about an access requirement, seek professional advice from your local organisation of disabled people or other professional body. But first of all you should ask your new trustee – they will be the expert in their own access needs!

It is also important to remember that the majority of disabled people have no significant access needs. Or, according to the Disability Rights Commission, those that do cost less than £100!

I. Taking account of specific needs

It might be useful for either the chair or a senior member of staff to meet with your new trustee to discuss their access needs. Whilst this meeting is confidential, trustees and staff can then act on requirements.

Following a first meeting or review meeting, a follow-up telephone call/email should be arranged to see if the access provision was adequate and to check if anything needs to change. Other points to consider include:

- **Minutes and papers** – these must be available in accessible formats where needed (large print, Braille, tape, etc.). They must be available in plenty of time for the meeting. Papers should not be tabled at a meeting. It may also be necessary for certain disabled people to be offered a reader as support to access the minutes.
- **Language** – short hand language can alienate. Language and terminology must be clear and concise and not use jargon.
- **Energy and concentration** – it may be necessary to include more regular breaks in the meeting for interpreters or for concentration. This will affect the style and timing of the meeting.
- **Length and time of the meeting** – these may need to change to accommodate access needs.
- **Expert advice** – one disabled person doesn't know everything there is to know about disability! It is important never to assume this.
- **Buddy** – alongside the chair it is a good idea to appoint another board member to act as a 'buddy.' They can be available in between meetings to answer questions or provide further background information. New members of boards whether disabled or non-disabled can be nervous about bothering staff or the chair who are busy people.

At all times it is vital that you ensure that individual's access needs remain confidential and only disclosed in an appropriate and professional manner.

2. Costs

There are a variety of ways of funding access. Here are a few:

- **Access to work** – some disabled people have an access to work agreement to support their day-to-day access costs at work. If they are attending your board meetings as part of their professional development within their 'day job' then access costs can be met.
- **Own budget** – it is likely that you will have to fund some costs from your own resources. Don't forget to factor this into your budget.
- **Fundraising and project funds** – more and more funders are recognising the need to budget for access and are happy to accept this budget line within applications.



Further Resources

This briefing is part of a body of information on effective governance and board development – see www.voluntaryarts.org/lyg (governance).

Briefings from VAN that relate to this topic are available to download from www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings:

- 111: *How inclusive are you? – a checklist for voluntary arts groups*
- 70: *Charity Trustees – what do they do? Part II – Managerial, legal and financial roles and responsibilities*
- 69: *Charity Trustees – what do they do? Part I – An overview*
- 57: *Effective Management Committees*
- 48: *Taking on Paid Staff – how do we do it? I. Good Practice in Recruitment*
- 47: *Taking on Paid Staff – how do we do it? II. Good Practice in Selection and Induction*
- 26: *Who Me, A Treasurer?*
- 21: *Making Committees Work for You*

Also:

- 86: *Making your website for everyone*
- 58: *Participatory Planning: Involving Your Stakeholders*
- 53: *Creating Clear Print – reaching the blind and partially sighted*
- 44: *Disability Discrimination Act Part III*
- 45: *How do I Create an Equal Opportunities Policy?*

Organisations:

- **The Governance Hub** – www.governancehub.org.uk
- **The Charity Commission for England and Wales** – www.charity-commission.gov.uk
- **The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)** – www.oscr.org.uk
- **The Wheel (Republic of Ireland)** – www.wheel.ie
- **Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action** – www.nicva.org
- **Wales Council for Voluntary Action** – www.wcva.org.uk
- **Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations** – www.scvo.org.uk
- **National Council for Voluntary Organisations** – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
- **DIY Committee Guide (Northern Ireland)** – online resource – www.diycommitteeguide.org

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Updated information may be available on the VAN website: www.voluntaryarts.org

Disclaimer: Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the information in this document is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith at the stated date but without accepting liability. We therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

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