

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Why should I become a trustee?*

This briefing has been written to help voluntary arts organisations recruit new trustees/committee members. Please feel free to pass it on to potential recruits. Additional copies are available via the VAN website at www.voluntaryarts.org.

Ninety-three per cent of charities and community organisations – including voluntary arts groups – have between one and five vacancies on their board or committee. They want people with passion and commitment to become trustees – people like you!**

You may be an amateur artist or craftsperson enthusiastic about the development of an art form in your community; or an administrator of an arts group working tirelessly behind the scenes so others can participate; or a tutor or workshop leader teaching people to do what you love doing. Or you may just be interested in the arts and want to try something new. This briefing highlights some of the reasons you might wish to become involved with a voluntary arts group as a trustee/committee member. Although this carries with it a level of commitment and responsibility, it can be rewarding and fun in many ways.

* In this briefing the word 'trustee' is used throughout. This term has a very specific meaning in charity law. Many of the issues addressed in this briefing apply not only to charities, but to companies and unincorporated associations too, where the equivalent role might be 'management committee member', 'board member', 'director', or something else. We have used 'trustee' here because a large number of voluntary arts organisations are registered charities. However, many are companies or unincorporated associations – in which case the terms 'management committee member', 'board member' or 'director' might be more appropriate than 'trustee'. For more information about different structures of governance, please refer to the regulators websites listed in the Further Resources section.

** From the Get on Board website at http://www.getonboard.org.uk/looking_for_trustees.php

A. Introduction

What do trustees do?

The job of the trustees is to govern the organisation. This means that they are responsible for ensuring that its aims, as laid out in the organisation's governing document (or 'constitution'), are met using the resources and skills available to them.

If the organisation has staff members, the trustees will rarely get involved in the everyday management of the organisation, but will provide guidance and support to the manager on overall strategic direction, and how to comply with legal and financial issues.

If the organisation does not have staff members, then the trustees can expect to have day-to-day running tasks alongside their strategic governance role.

How much time do trustees have to give?

Trustees meet on a regular basis, often quarterly, to discuss the issues affecting the organisation and to check its financial situation and that it is complying with the law.

Every year, a review of the achievements of the organisation over the previous year, along with strategic goals and targets for the next, will be put in writing in the form of the annual report and accounts, which are presented at the Annual General Meeting (or 'AGM'). Depending on the organisation, its members may vote on changes to the board/committee of trustees, particularly the posts of Chair, Secretary and Treasurer, when their term of office is up. New trustees may also be elected or 'co-opted' to fill a particular position.

Do trustees get paid?

While trustees don't usually get paid for trustee work, they should get any expenses incurred (e.g. for train tickets, petrol or overnight accommodation) reimbursed to them. However, they may get paid for other tasks they do for the organisation, e.g. leading a workshop. Nobody becomes a trustee for the money. They do it because they care about the organisation and want to help guide it to success. There are, however, a great number of other benefits to becoming a trustee!



B. Why should I become a trustee?

I. Benefits for me

Becoming a trustee of a voluntary arts group has many benefits. These include:

- **taking your arts/crafts practice to the next level** – you may have been Salsa dancing (or drawing, acting, DJing, etc...) for years. You may know everybody who does Salsa in your area and attended all the classes and events. You may even be teaching it on a part-time basis. What next? Making a living from your art form isn't always possible, or desirable. Becoming a board/committee member is a great way of taking the next step, enabling you to become a leader in your chosen art form and shaping the way it is practiced and experienced in your region.
- **influencing the way your favourite art form is experienced by your community** – do you despair at the way in which the art form you are passionate about is robbed of all its vibrancy and excitement because of the way it is delivered by the arts groups in your area? Can you think of a better way to communicate the sense of wonder you feel when expressing yourself through this art form? As a trustee you will be well placed to change the way in which an organisation achieves its aims through the delivery of its art form.
- **representing your sector of the community and getting its voice heard** – you may feel that you represent a certain part of the community (e.g. people from the other side of town, single parents, Black people, people with disabilities, etc.) who don't feature much in the arts provision on offer and don't seem to have any influence over what is available and how it is delivered. You could start your own group to cater for the sector of the community currently overlooked. Or, perhaps more effectively, you could enter into a discussion with the existing group/s and try to change things from within – by becoming a trustee. If it doesn't work, the experience you will have gained will be invaluable if you ever do decide to set up your own group.
- **having a say about how the organisation is run** – you may have been involved with the organisation as a participant for years; or you may have only known about it from afar; or you may have never heard of the organisation at all before considering becoming a trustee. If you have been involved with the organisation for some time, you'll probably have some ideas about what it is good at (and should build on) and what it is not so good at (and should change). This is your chance to help guide the organisation in a direction you think will be most beneficial to it. Of course, you won't be making the decisions on your own, and the other trustees may disagree with your ideas, but becoming a trustee is an effective way of influencing an organisation's development. If you have never heard of the organisation before considering becoming a trustee, take some time to get to know it. You may have experience of other organisations that could be applied in this situation. Often, a fresh perspective is exactly what the organisation needs in order to instigate change.
- **putting your existing skills and experience to work** – you may have skills and experience that you no longer use and feel are going to waste. For example, you may have changed career and no longer have any use for the things you learnt in your old job. You may have trained as an accountant, but then changed tack and become a performance artist – what better way to give back to the arts world by becoming a Treasurer for your favourite arts organisation! You may be unable to work full-time because of illness or caring responsibilities – rather than letting your talents go unused, you could become a trustee and put them to full use.
- **making a contribution** – you may be retired or semi-retired and but still want to be involved in making your community a good place to be. As people get older and the demands of raising a family and going to work reduce, they often feel that they would like to 'give back' and to make a contribution in some way. Volunteering as a trustee can be an effective way of doing this.
- **increasing your skills and experience** – you may have gone as far as you want to academically, and have limited training opportunities at your current place of work. Where else are you going to increase your skills and experience to enable you to move on in your professional, voluntary or artistic career? Trusteeship is a great way to increase your skills and experience. You will learn how organisations are run, what kinds of problems they come up against and the best ways to solve them. You will also learn lots of other specific skills such as how organisations present their accounts, how meetings are chaired or how to deal with difficult people. Some boards/committees send their trustees on training events or courses to further expand their skills.
- **having something that looks good on your CV** – being a trustee is an impressive inclusion on any CV. It shows that you have a level of maturity and commitment and that you care enough about your art form and community to want to give something back regardless of being paid. The Chair of the board/committee you are on may even agree to provide you with a character reference.
- **networking** – as a trustee you will have regular contact with other influential people involved in the art form – not only other board/committee members, but staff and participants from all walks of life. You will build up a list of dozens, if not hundreds, of useful contacts.
- **having fun** – trusteeship can be challenging, but also a lot of fun. It is a great opportunity to make friends with people who share an interest with you, but whom you might never otherwise meet. Working together to overcome problems can give any group a wonderful sense of comradeship and team spirit, and you'll also be able to share in and celebrate the successes you have helped bring about.



2. Benefits for the group or organisation

As well as the personal benefits to you, you'll also be helping the group or organisation you're joining as a trustee. Benefits to the organisation include:

- **incorporating new skills and insights** – the organisation might be lacking skills in a certain area (e.g. marketing or event planning) to the detriment of those taking part. If you have skills and experience in the areas currently lacking in the board/committee, you will be especially desirable as a trustee. Don't forget to tell the board/committee about your achievements and expertise when it is considering recruiting you as a trustee, even if you are unsure whether or not they are relevant to the group.
- **bringing new energy** – some boards/committees have trustees that have been there for years, have fallen into their 'comfort zone' and are contributing little that is new. The inclusion of a new trustee, with enthusiasm, motivation and a fresh outlook may be exactly what they have been waiting for to be able to kick-start the organisation into a new phase of life.
- **being more representative and democratic** – the organisation may be unrepresentative – in that an important section of the community it serves is not represented at board/committee level, or at all. If that section of the community includes you and the organisation is being proactive in its attempts to be truly inclusive, then there is a good chance that your contribution, as a trustee, will be both desirable and highly-prized.

C. Who can be a trustee?

You may have an image in your head of what a typical trustee is like, but trustees come from all social and cultural backgrounds, are both young or old, and have a variety of personal situations.

As long as they give a certain level of commitment and are trustworthy and honest, almost *anyone* can become a trustee. Being a trustee is about bringing your own unique insights, vision and support to your organisation. Everyone has skills and experiences that could be useful – from professional skills to simply knowing your local area.

Depending on the organisation's constitution, you *may not* be able to become a trustee for a variety of reasons (e.g. if you are an existing staff member or you are excluded by other restrictions stated within the organisation's governing document etc). There are also other legal limitations to becoming a trustee: if you have been barred from working with certain groups of people, you are under 18 years of age or you have been convicted of an offence involving dishonesty or deception. Not all of these restrictions apply for every organisation, so it's best to check with the organisation first (and with the relevant regulators if the organisation is a charity or a company – see *Further Resources section for contact details*).

The legal responsibilities of being a trustee

If the organisation is a formal body (e.g. charity or company), then its trustees are responsible for its legal administration. They must ensure that it complies with the requirements of the relevant legislation. For more details of the financial responsibilities of trustees, read VAN Briefing 70: **What do trustees do? Part II – Managerial, legal and financial roles and responsibilities**, and check with your nation's charity and/or company regulator (see *Further Resources section for contact details*).

Whilst becoming a trustee involves a certain level of commitment and responsibility, there is no need to be fearful of this. As long as you act with integrity and honesty, being a trustee can be interesting and rewarding.

D. How do I become a trustee?

Finding a position

If you haven't been invited to join a committee or don't already have an organisation in mind or the one you are interested in is not suitable, there are many ways to find out about other trustee vacancies:

- **Ask around** – word-of-mouth is often the best way to find out about opportunities that might be of interest to you.
- **Check the advertisements** – in the local, national or specialist press. The VAN websites (main and nation-specific sites) often contain voluntary opportunities – sign up for regular e-news notifications at www.voluntaryarts.org/news.
- **Check the Do-It website** – www.do-it.org.uk. Do-It was launched in 2001 with the first, and still the only, national database of volunteering opportunities in the UK. Its search facility allows you to search for opportunities corresponding to a particular 'interest' (e.g. 'arts and culture') and 'activity' (e.g. 'trusteeship and committee work') in a specified town or postcode area.
- **Check out your local Volunteer Centre** –
 - **England:** sign up at the Get On Board website at www.getonboard.org.uk. It will match you with your local Volunteer Centre who will help you find suitable trustee opportunities. Alternatively, you can contact your local Volunteer Centre directly – find details of yours at www.volunteering.org.uk/finder.
 - **Northern Ireland:** visit the Volunteer Development Agency for Northern Ireland website at <http://volunteering-ni.org> for more information, or contact your local Volunteer Centre for opportunities in your area – details at www.volunteernow.co.uk.
 - **Republic of Ireland:** visit the Volunteer Centres Ireland website at www.volunteer.ie to find your local volunteer centre and available opportunities around the country. See also www.boardmatch.ie, a dedicated and free service to match non-profit boards with skilled and experienced volunteers.
 - **Scotland:** visit the Volunteer Centre Network Scotland website at www.volunteerscotland.org.uk for volunteer



opportunities, more information and details of your local Volunteer Centre.

- **Wales:** visit the Volunteering Wales website at www.volunteering-wales.net for more information, or contact your local Volunteer Centre for opportunities in your area – details at www.wcva.org.uk/volunteering.

The first task is to find out as much as you can about the organisation(s) you are interested in. If it is an established group, you can do this by reading their annual report and governing documents (often available on their websites), looking at their websites and promotional literature, and by talking to trustees, staff members and participants.

The next step is to approach the organisation and ask if there are any vacancies on its board/committee. If they haven't got any opportunities at that time, ask them to keep you in mind for the future. Check back every so often. Think about volunteering for them in the meantime to get a better idea of what they do and how they operate.

If they do have a vacancy, don't automatically volunteer to fill it. Ask them what the role requires, what particular skills and/or experience they are looking for, and how much time and energy you will need to devote to it. Think long and hard about whether the position is for you, and if not, don't worry – keep looking and sooner or later something more suitable will come along.

Taking up the position

You may be required to attend an interview before you are appointed or elected to the position of trustee. This may be formal or informal. If you are recruited, you should be given a full induction to get you up to speed on the organisation and its workings, and to make you feel welcome.

And now the real business of being a trustee starts!

Good luck and enjoy it!

Further Resources

VAN briefings

These are available to download for free from the VAN website at www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings:

- 69: **What do trustees do? Part I – An overview**
- 70: **What do trustees do? Part II – Managerial, legal and financial roles and responsibilities**
- 110: **Whose Board? Whose Agenda?** Including disabled and deaf people in your management committees

Other resources

- **Charity Trustee Networks** – helps trustees to support each other through face-to-face networks around the UK – www.ctnetworks.org.uk
- **TrusteeNet** – Charity Trustee Networks' free national network of trustees and management committee members – www.trusteenet.org.uk
- **Do-It** – www.do-it.org.uk
- **The Governance Hub** – www.governancehub.org.uk
- **Get on Board** – www.getonboard.org.uk
- **Boardmatch Ireland** – www.boardmatch.ie
- **DIY Committee Guide (NI)** – www.diycommitteeguide.org
- **The Charity Commission for England and Wales** – www.charity-commission.gov.uk
- **The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)** – www.oscr.org.uk
- **Companies House** – www.companieshouse.gov.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

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Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency.

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.

Do you need this publication in an alternative format?
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