COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS' LEADERSHIP

Abstract

This small-scale study looked at what community members know about the role of trustees and the decision-making processes in voluntary organisations. The discussions with community members were then used to produce a short survey for trustees of voluntary or community organisations.

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Community Involvement in Voluntary Organisations' Leadership

Background

In the Five Year Impact Evaluation of The Old Fire Station carried out by Leeds Beckett University in 2022, the issue of representation on the board of trustees was raised. It was felt that they weren't representative of the community they served but it was something they were keen to address.

In the course of our research and programme evaluations with third sector organisations, we have found that although charities are involving the wider community in designing and developing their offers more than ever before, the boards of trustees and other decision-making bodies don't tend to be representative of the populations they work with. Some organisations have tried to increase the diversity of their boards, but they often find people are resistant to joining. Diversity on boards of trustees is needed to bring varied perspectives, skills and experience which strengthen the organisations (NCVO, 2022). There is also strong evidence that communities with higher levels of involvement in decision-making processes in their area are healthier (South, 2015) but more needs to be done to support meaningful involvement.

A report by Getting on Board (2017) warned of the "looming crisis in charity trustee recruitment" after its research found that 74% of charities surveyed find recruiting trustees difficult, 59% recognised they weren't representative of their community and/or service users, and almost half of them (45%) weren't making efforts to increase diversity.

Community partners have suggested some reasons for the lack of uptake of the opportunity to join boards, for example, that people find the prospect intimidating, boring or too much of a burden, but there hasn't been a piece of work speaking to community members themselves.

This small-scale study looked at what community members know about the role of trustees and the decision-making processes in voluntary organisations. The discussions with community members were then used to produce a short survey for trustees of voluntary or community organisations.

Methods

We shared an invitation to take part in the research through our network of community partner organisations via email and social media (Twitter and Facebook). Two organisations that are based in community centres supported recruitment of participants for the first stage of the project. Two focus groups took place with a total of 21 participants who are volunteers and/or community members who use the centres. Focus group 1 was held at a community centre in West Leeds and focus group 2 was held at a community centre in East Leeds.

The groups were asked about what the organisations did, how decisions were made about what they did and how community members were included in decision-making. They were also asked what they knew about the charity's trustees and their role.

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were then analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2019) using NVivo software. The key themes from the focus groups are summarised in the *Findings* section.

The participants were asked what they would like to know about the charity's trustees. They were given post-it notes to write down questions or they told the researchers the questions they had. Using the questions from the two focus groups, the researchers produced a short survey for trustees.

Survey

The questions for the trustees were very similar in the two focus groups. They were particularly interested in what trustees do and why they had chosen that specific organisation to be a trustee for. They were also curious to know if they lived nearby and if they attended events in the local community. The full list of questions in the trustee survey is below:

1. How would you describe the role of a trustee?
2. Could you tell us why you wanted to be a trustee in general, and with this community in particular?
3. How long have you been a trustee for this organisation?
4. How far away do you live from the organisation you are a trustee for?
5. How often do you attend community events linked to the community organisation where you are a trustee?
6. How many hours do you work as a trustee for this organisation per year? (Approximately)
7. Do you think the board of trustees for this organisation is representative of the community they are serving?
8. How much do you agree with the following statement: "the views of community members influence decision-making at the organisation".
9. How many organisations are you a trustee for?
10. How well do you feel you know the community and the local area?
11. How are you in touch with the community that the organisation supports?
12. What have you learnt from community members/volunteers?
13. How could trustees connect more with community members and volunteers?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to say about being a trustee?

The groups also decided to ask the main occupation, gender, age group, ethnicity, and religion of trustees.

Findings – Focus Group Discussions

Role of organisation

The participants at the two focus groups were asked to describe what the organisations did. In both cases they described supportive, welcoming organisations that were community-focused and had the main aim of helping people. Both organisations had a community centre in a Leeds neighbourhood, one in East Leeds and the other in West Leeds.
The organisations run activities such as arts groups, walking groups, activities for children and also help meet local need in the community with food parcels, debt advice and mental health support.

Connection to organisation

The participants all attended groups and/or used services offered at the organisations. Many had started off as participants/service users and then went on to become volunteers, often leading groups of their own. In some cases, they had then become paid employees.

They came to the organisations by word of mouth from friends, family and neighbours; referrals from health professionals; outreach in the community; after seeing a specific group advertised e.g. an art class or a new mums' group. One person went into the centre to find out more, but it was more common to have a recommendation.

Decision making on the ground

We asked the groups to tell us who decides what groups/activities are offered?

In general, the participants felt they had a lot of influence over what groups and activities are offered:

> "We do ask parents who we meet what they'd like to see, and we try to set up with, and when I started as a volunteer, I really wanted to start up a walking group. I was obsessed with starting up a walking group […] I really wanted it to set off and it did, it did set off." [FG1, Speaker 11]

> "It's all about suggesting things and once things are in place, if you go out to volunteer in a group, it's up to you what you want to do. Then you've got the support of [organisation] to help you with funding if needs be." [FG2, speaker 3]

At one of the organisations, participants talked about a committee that used to make the main decisions and involved the wider community through a public AGM. The group didn't think the AGM was public anymore and weren't sure about how the committee works now.

Perceptions of Trustees

At one of the focus groups, no one had met a trustee as far as they knew. At the other focus group, some of the group knew one trustee who was a friend who had recently joined the board.

For many, it wasn't clear what the role of trustee involved, although there was a general idea that it was connected to money, management and decision-making. People raised concerns about the trustees cutting budgets and cancelling groups if the numbers were low.

> "They are sort of the money people, maybe that." [FG1, speaker 4]

> "They're kind of decision makers. Maybe what they think is what best for the community centre, like fundings and for the funding." [FG1, speaker 11]

> "They are basically overseers; they manage the finances and pay for the rooms." [FG2, speaker 6]

There was a perception that the boards weren't very diverse and that members tended to be quite "posh".

> "I don't think it's that diverse panel. I don't think no one will know like who they are kind of thing. It's not like there's pictures of them in the building either, the trustees, or the role of the trustees are." [FG1, speaker 7]

Connecting Community Members and Trustees

The participants were keen to learn more about who the trustees are and what they do. They suggested ways that trustees and community members who use the centres could be more connected.

> ➢ **Community Spokesperson**

Both groups suggested having some volunteers or a community member attend trustee meetings and then report back to the wider community. There was some discussion as to how they could reach the wider community to update them: it might involve having a number of open face to face meetings, having a zoom option and/or sharing a simple, written summary. They could then gather feedback from the community to relay to the trustees. One person said even sharing the agenda from the board meetings would give community members some idea of what was being discussed.

"We should have a spokesperson, you know, a person that, we can't all go in but somebody that is going to listen to everything that is said and write it down and come back to everyone else and say this was said, that was said, and what do you think about this? Because they can't have everybody going to the meetings, but at least if we had one person." [FG2, Speaker 3]

Participants felt that they heard "bits and pieces" from different people about bigger, organisational decisions.

➢ **An open meeting**

Both groups discussed the possibility of having a meeting with the trustees that was open to the whole community. The purpose would be to both share updates on the organisation and also to learn more about the community members' priorities. There wasn't a consensus on how often the meetings should be held, but at least once a year if not quarterly, although raising interest in attending could be a problem.

"Speaker 6: maybe a night where they [the trustees] show up, and we sit and they just ask us. Surely that doesn't cost much.

Speaker 7: The problem we've got is getting people to actually come to it.

Speaker 6: If people don't come, that is their problem. No matter what you do, you aren't going to get everyone." [FG2]

In both focus groups, participants spoke about how difficult it can be even to encourage people even to come into the community centres, so more in-depth involvement will take time and needs to be offered in a way that is interesting and accessible.

"I know I've spoken to lots of people and still some haven't set foot in here, no matter how hard I try. And it's… come! Next week they'll actually come, they'll eventually come, but yeah, I find engagement very, very hard." [FG1, speaker 8]

➢ **Meetings with the volunteers**

Taking into account the difficulties of holding a meeting for anyone to go to (what time and date would suit people, whether there was enough space, how to encourage people to attend), participants in both focus groups thought that having the opportunity for group/activity volunteers to meet trustees would be useful. They felt this would help to keep the trustees connected to what was happening in the day to day running of the organisation as well as to connect the wider volunteers with the higher level decisions.

One of the focus groups mentioned a special event that had celebrated the contribution of volunteers that had made them feel valued. Similarly, a participant at the other focus group described a Christmas event where a senior person in the organisation thanked them for their volunteering. Many of the participants would like to see this happen more, not necessarily events but for management to be in and around the organisation getting to know volunteers and showing appreciation. They would like to see the trustees in and around the community centre too.

> **Surgeries**

In focus group 1, a participant suggested holding sessions like councillors' surgeries, where people could drop in and speak to the board. Other members of the group agreed that it would be interesting to give this approach a try.

> **Photos of the trustees and management**

A simple first step to introducing trustees to the community could be to have their photos in the community centre. One participant talked about how useful it was in a doctor's surgery to know who everyone was, and the group agreed enthusiastically.

> "Like pictures of them like. Go to doctor's surgery, yeah. With the pictures of all the doctors and then the nurses then the receptionist, so we know." [FG1, speaker 5]

> **A suggestion box**

One participant would like to have a box where people can put comments about what they would like to see happen at the organisation including ideas for new groups.

Would you consider being a trustee?

The role of trustee didn't appeal to most of the participants. For some, it was because they didn't want to change the relationship that they have with the organisation, which is very much about the social element, rather than the financial:

> "Speaker 7: For me it is that I love [organisation name], I think if I did something like that it would take away the love that I have for it.
> Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
> Speaker 7: Well, like I said, I come to the groups not just as a volunteer, but as a service user. It's the socialising. I wouldn't want to turn that into anything else. […] I wouldn't want to ruin that by turning it into something to do with money and that." [FG2]

Others were concerned about the time commitment because they already had a lot of demands on their time. Some participants felt that it was a "posh job", and it might require specific qualifications.

Other messages for trustees/decision-makers

The groups made some practical suggestions such as recommending that:

- The organisation buy a minibus to support people to attend groups and to travel to other places
- They invest in more equipment generally
- They support people to become more physically active through purchasing resources to promote fitness.

One group asked the trustees and management to consider how they can retain good staff members because they were concerned people were leaving due to salaries being too low.

Findings – Survey

Demographics of the respondents

There were 22 responses to the survey. The majority of respondents were women (73%), and just over a quarter were men (27%). Just over half (55%, n=12) described themselves as 'not religious', 36% (n=8) were Christian and one person was Muslim. Almost all of the respondents were white (n=21) and one person was Asian/British Asian. The respondents ages were mainly between 36 and 65 (86%) with no one under 26 (see figure 1). Around half of the respondents worked in management (48%) and almost a fifth (19%) were retired or semi-retired.
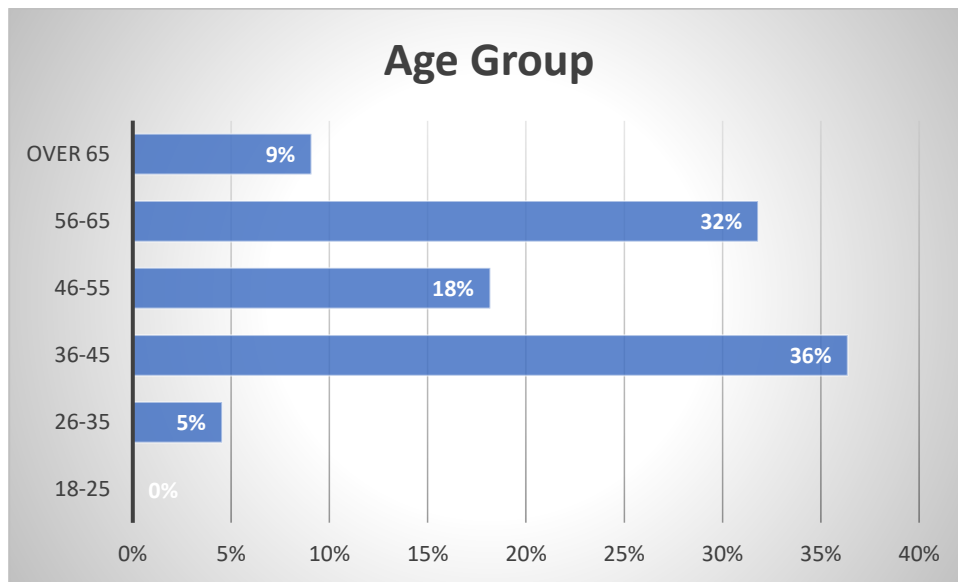

Age Group

Age Group	Percentage
OVER 65	9%
56-65	32%
46-55	18%
36-45	36%
26-35	5%
18-25	0%

Figure 1 Age Group

The Role of a Trustee

The most common themes when asked to define the role of a trustee were strategy, governance and oversight. Trustees have a range of responsibilities relating to meeting the business administration needs of the organisation, ensuring legal compliance as a charity, and supporting teams/volunteers. Several respondents highlighted their role in leadership and guiding the direction of the organisation.

The participants also described the role of trustee as being demanding, but rewarding and interesting.

"Oversight and governance of a charity. Legal responsibility for ensuring financial and operational compliance and stability".

"Rewarding but can also be high pressure as you are responsible for steering the organisation".

The role typically required up to 50 hours per year of input from those who completed the survey, although two people invested more than 500 hours.
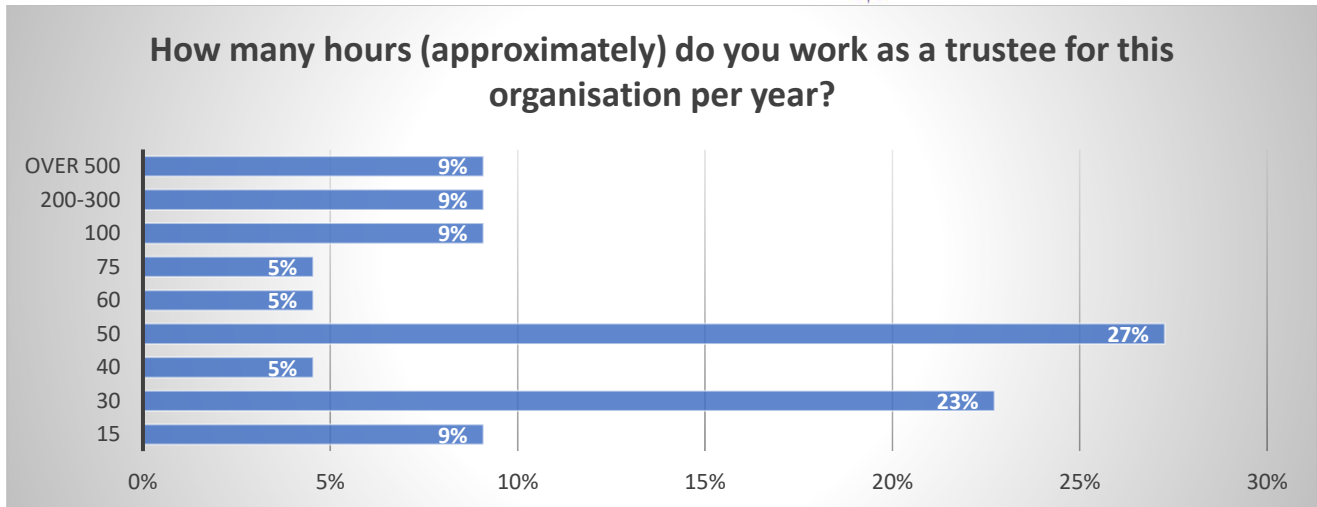
How many hours (approximately) do you work as a trustee for this organisation per year?

Figure 2 Hours of Volunteering as a Trustee

Motivations for Being a Trustee

'Giving back' to the community, and to the charity, were significant motivations for many to become trustees. In general, the focus was on sharing their experience (both in terms of lived experience and professional expertise) and skills to benefit the community and to support the charity to meet their goals. Several respondents described the mutual benefit of also developing their professional skills and learning from other people connected to the charity. Sharing the values of the organisation and feeling strongly about the work were also factors in taking on the role.

> *"I learnt so much from working with the charity - how to work with the local community - that I felt it was a way of giving back - providing my time and skills to help the organisation flourish even further".*

> *"To be able to offer my knowledge, skills, experience in a voluntary/pro bono capacity. Using my own personal experience of mental health challenges to support others".*

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of how long respondents have been volunteering as trustees. The largest number of respondents belonged to the group of 'less than 1 year' (27%), however, there was a spread of responses between less than 1 year and up to 10 years.

How long have you been a trustee for this organisation?
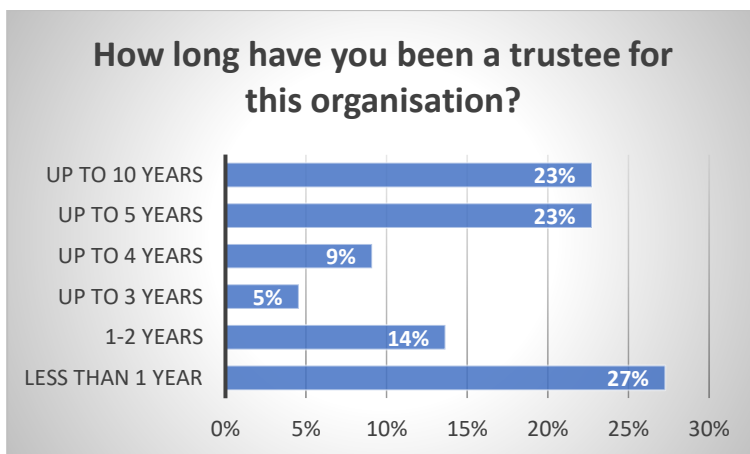
Figure 3 Length of time as a trustee

The majority of respondents are only trustees for 1 organisation (n=16). Four respondents are trustees for 2 organisations, and two are trustees for 3 organisations.

Connecting with the Community

In most cases, the respondents had close connections to the community through living and/or working there. Almost three quarters (73%) of the respondents live within 5 miles of the organisation they act as trustee for (see figure 4).
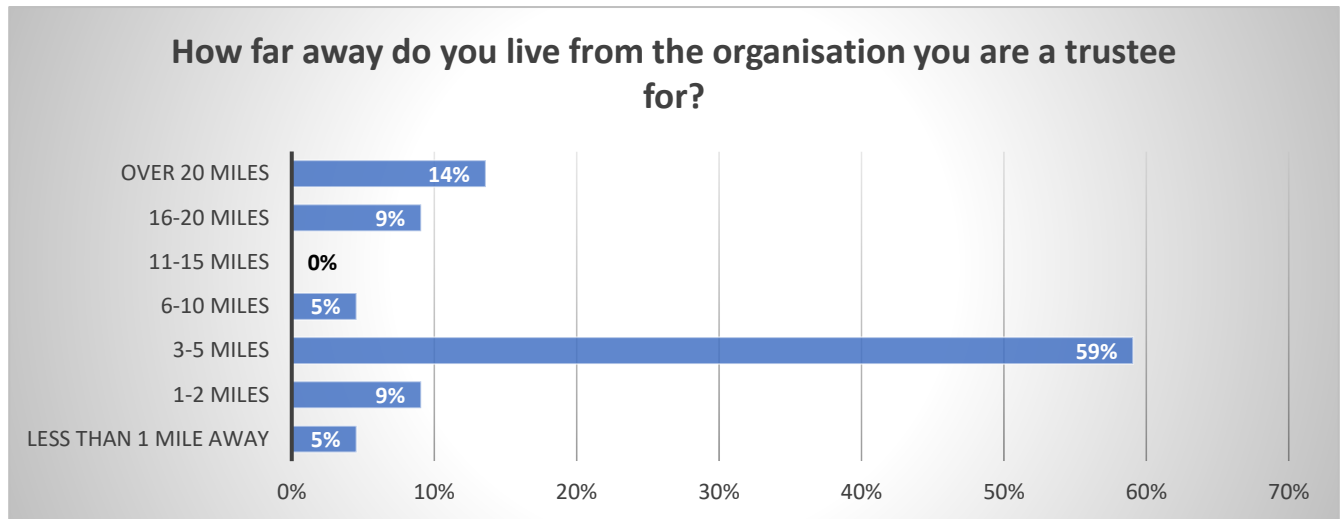

How far away do you live from the organisation you are a trustee for?

- OVER 20 MILES — 14%
- 16-20 MILES — 9%
- 11-15 MILES — 0%
- 6-10 MILES — 5%
- 3-5 MILES — 59%
- 1-2 MILES — 9%
- LESS THAN 1 MILE AWAY — 5%

Figure 4 Distance from organisation

For others, they are connected through social media, attending groups/events (see figure 5), volunteering, and through other staff members in the organisation. Several described actively making time to hear what community members had to say and were keen to find more ways of doing this.

> "By spending time in the local organisation where local people will be, attending subgroups focused around certain topics and creating time to listen to the community, many of the staff are from the local community so they share their perspectives, staff and community engage with Trustees meetings. There is always more to do around this topic I feel."

How often do you attend community events linked to the community organisation where you are a trustee?

- 0%
- Most of the time — 27%
- About half the time — 27%
- Sometimes — 46%
- Never — 0%

Figure 5 Attendance at Community Events

The majority of respondents felt they knew the community very or extremely well (64%, see figure 6) and they all believed that the board of trustees at their organisations were representative of the community they served at least to some degree (59%) if not completely (36%). All of those who completed the survey felt that the views of community members influence decision-making at the organisation (a 50-50 split between 'completely agree' and 'somewhat agree' with the statement: "the views of community members influence decision-making at the organisation").
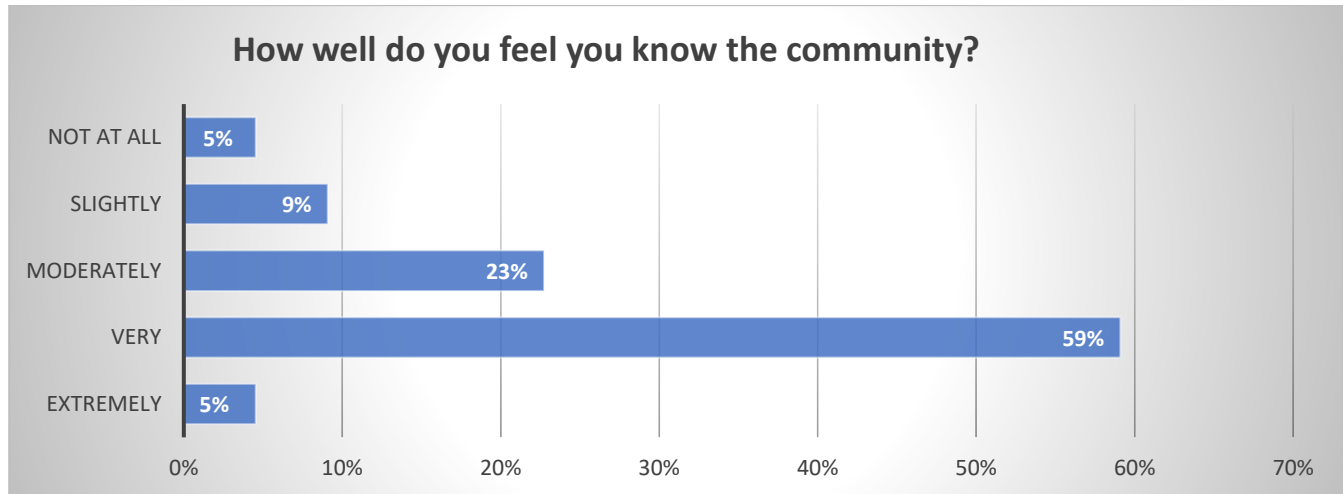

Figure 6 How well do you know the community?

Learning from Community Members

Many responses referred to learning from the community to develop the charity's offer to better meet their needs. They've learnt about local assets, people's talents, local priorities, what is working well and how things could be better.

> "What is like to live in this area, what their strengths, passions and assets are, what is important to them and also what are some of the local needs, what could be done differently."

Others shared more personal learning about the challenges other people face, how resilient people can be and how important it is for everyone's perspective to be included. Several mentioned learning to be flexible and the importance of keeping an open mind:

> "Be slow to judge, people are more resilient than we sometimes give them credit for, there is a place for everyone."

Some respondents felt that they were already doing enough to involve community members, but others saw in their organisations that not all trustees were equally involved and suggested this could be managed by making attendance at some events a requirement of the role. The majority of respondents believe attending community events to be a key part of the role and some suggested offering regular connection sessions or 'meet the board' events in addition to this. For several people, more informal interaction would be preferable rather than a time-tabled activity. Including local community members on the board could improve community connection and the sharing of information.

> "Not all trustees are as 'active' as others. In the role profile, trustee agreement and code of conduct there should be reference to needing to commit to attending events that include volunteers and clients (community members)."

> "Attend social events and things that seem less 'important' than formal board meetings. This is where the learning really happens and you get to find out more about the diverse range of lived experiences in the area."

> "It's all about spending time informally with community members and volunteers. As my life has got busier I've done this less, and I miss it. The responsibility is with the trustees to make it happen."

They also raised the challenge of time constraints, reaching marginalised people who aren't already engaging with the organisation, and potentially a lack of interest in who the board are or having contact with them.

Challenges

Many described the role as a great opportunity and a privilege to support a cause that is important to you and to learn from others. Respondents also found it to be hard work that unfortunately is not always recognised.

It is an important role that requires reflection and some respondents felt trustees would benefit from more training development.

Two very important points were raised regarding challenges: one was around how you can expect people who are experiencing severe social and economic disadvantage to be trustees without compensating them financially (which isn't possible for small organisations in particular), and the other point was about the need for the model of boards of trustees to evolve to suit the circumstances organisations now operate in.

> "We have actively encouraged more members to join the board and we have had a couple of people who are also service users join. That said, there is only so much you can ask of people who are already experiencing one or more social disadvantages - and asking them to volunteer their free time (if they have any) as a trustee is not always reasonable. I have seen bigger charities choosing to pay their trustees (I saw an advert for one paying 3k p/a) but that's not affordable to us."

> "The model is outdated - but it's the only one we have at present. The point is that arts organisations need support from a range of objective and skilled perspectives that are best done on a voluntary but committed basis."

Summary of Recommendations

A community spokesperson who attends the board of trustees' meetings and then shares updates with the wider community

An open meeting where the trustees talk to volunteers and people who the organisation supports

Meetings with the volunteers could help keep the trustees connected to the day-to-day running of the charity. This could show appreciation for everyone's hard work too

Surgeries – a drop in to meet trustees and ask questions, like councillors' surgeries for the public

Photos of trustees and management in community centres so people know who they are

A suggestion box for people to put ideas and comments in so the trustees hear their views

Provide **training** for trustees

Change the way boards of trustees work so there is space for different types of people

Compensate people for their time to support their involvement as trustees

Reporting Back to the Community

In the final phase of the project, the research team returned to the two community centres to present the findings from the focus groups and trustee survey to the original participants who co-designed the survey. Trustees and managers were also invited to these sessions. The groups discussed the findings and agreed the key recommendations for taking the work forward.

In total, 15 community members, 1 trustee, 1 senior manager of a community organisation, and 1 senior community worker took part.

A summary of the community responses to the research recommendations is outlined below.

1. **A community spokesperson who attends the trustees' board**
   This was generally thought to be a good idea but there was concern about who could do it. The representative would need to be confident and have good communication skills as well as having the time to devote to this role. There isn't a straightforward way for a spokesperson to report back to the wider community.

2. **Open Meeting/Meeting with Volunteers**
   An open meeting with trustees/meeting with the volunteers were seen as the same thing by many of the participants, and all felt that this was a good idea, including the representatives from management and the trustee. The conclusion from discussions was that his meeting should be once or twice a year and, to encourage attendance, it should be part of an existing event e.g. a celebration already scheduled.

3. **Surgery/Drop-in session**
The reception to this idea was lukewarm from the community members and volunteers who thought this may not be feasible as a way of meeting trustees. The trustee was open to trying it but agreed with the rest of the participants that people probably would not attend.

4. **Photos**
There was a lot of support for having photos of trustees and management on display in community centres and also social media/webpages and people thought it would be easy to implement. Several volunteers were concerned about trustee privacy and advised it should not be compulsory.

Participants suggested adding a poster next to the photos that outlined the trustee role, and the practical support people receive to be a trustee e.g. expenses and training. They proposed a title: Your community needs you! Have you got what it takes to be a trustee?

5. **A suggestion box**
Many of the volunteers felt positive about this, saying that it was easy to set up and that where they had seen these, they were used.

6. **Training**
There was support for more training and this could be an opportunity for trustees and other volunteers to meet.
There was also interest in sessions open to everyone that introduce what being a trustee involves, although it needs to be clear there is no obligation to take it further. Confidence is a significant factor in volunteering as a trustee and community members need to be armed with all of the information and shown that they have something to contribute so they are empowered to take the next step. It was suggested that general volunteer induction training could also include information on the trustee role. Managers and existing trustees recognise that there is a "mystique" around the role and an anxiety about what the responsibility entails. There needs to be a recognition of the barriers in people's personal circumstances, finances and levels of confidence.

7. **Changing the way boards work**
This was difficult for participants to comment on without some more concrete suggestions about how things could change. They were all supportive of anything that would make organisations more inclusive and boards more representative.

8. **Compensation**
Opinion was divided among the volunteers and other community members on compensation in the form of cash payment because it is a voluntary position, and it would be unfair to pay some volunteers and not others. Some thought payment in some form is needed to make it a realistic option for more people in the community and vouchers could be considered, if payment in monetary form was not an option. However, the cost of living crisis has made it even more difficult to recruit people from areas experiencing deprivation and some felt that money would help to include more marginalised people. A member of senior management clarified that legally, charities cannot pay trustees for their time, but they reimburse reasonable expenses. The group though that making it clear that reasonable expenses

included childcare as well as travel costs, refreshments, and training could attract more people, particularly those who would find childcare a significant barrier.

The participants agreed that compensation does not have to be in the form of money, but instead through gestures of appreciation, for example annual events to celebrate all volunteers.

Next Steps

There was strong consensus on the most useful recommendations to take forward:

1) Displaying **photos** of trustees and management – a quick win!

2) Organising **open meetings** for trustees, volunteers and the wider community – ideally attached to an existing event.

3) Offering a light-touch **introduction** to what trustees do, information on how to become one and what the benefits are for the organisation and the individual.

Conclusion

Trustees are generally part of the community, but people often don't know who they are. Having photographs of trustees and management on display could be a positive step towards identifying trustees.

Everyone is keen for the wider community to be more involved in decisions, and they have a lot of ideas to improve connection and communication. Volunteers who support activities at the charities and the trustees (who are also volunteers) sometimes feel their work isn't appreciated. Open meetings could be a way of celebrating volunteer contributions and connecting people across an organisation.

There is a clear pathway from participating in groups, to becoming a volunteer and then taking on increased responsibility. The first step in encouraging people to become trustees could be an informal information session which introduces what trustees do for charities and the benefits to the individual.

When looking at new ways to connect and promote inclusion, organisations need to take into account time constraints, and to consider how to compensate people for their time and make sure people feel valued.

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