



UNDERSTANDING TRUSTEE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CHALLENGES

A SURVEY OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

FOREWORD

Charities play a crucial role in addressing social needs and driving positive change. A central part of a charity's success is its trustees.

Trustees are the guardians of a charity's mission. They oversee its strategic direction, financial management, and legal compliance. Trustees bring a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. This helps charities make better decisions and have a bigger impact.

Trustees are volunteers. They give a lot of time and effort and take on big responsibilities. Their work helps charities support communities across the country.

Being a trustee is a rewarding experience. It gives people the chance to learn new skills, meet new people, and gain experience. Most importantly, trustees get to give back to a cause or a community they care about.

Trustees play a sophisticated role in governance, compliance, and strategic decision-making. The role is becoming more complex as charities navigate an ever-evolving landscape. Tackling issues such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and global health crises requires trustees with more diverse skills.

According to the Charity Commission's **Breath of Fresh Air report**, anywhere between one in three and one in two charities have a trustee vacancy. This means charities are missing out on the skills and knowledge they need to deliver the biggest impact possible. And it's making the job harder for trustees who already give so much to their communities.

To address this issue, we must first understand it.

That's why we're proud to launch this report as part of Trustees' Week 2024. We hope the report will help charities take action to support trustees, reduce barriers and help our sector flourish.



SARAH ELLIOTT
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, NCVO

INTRODUCTION

There are just over 170,000 charities in England and Wales. Each one has a unique mission and approach, but they all rely on their board of trustees.

As charities face rising demands and continued financial strain, the strategic leadership of trustees has never been so vital.

But many charities struggle to maintain full trustee boards. This makes it harder for them to be effective and sustainable. To address this issue, we first need to understand its causes and implications. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of trustee vacancies and retention within charities.

OUR SECTOR SURVEY

In August 2024 we surveyed 294 voluntary sector organisations. We wanted to understand:

- the trustee recruitment and retention challenges voluntary organisations experience
- the impact these challenges have on trustee boards
- ways these challenges could be addressed.

This report sets out the findings of our survey.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey was carried out online between 22 August and 5 September 2024. Survey respondents were invited to take part via email and social media by NCVO and other voluntary sector infrastructure bodies.

This survey was designed to generate high-level insights and create a snapshot of issues facing the sector. We gathered responses from different sized charities to quickly identify major trends.

DEFINITIONS

In this report, voluntary organisations are divided into six groups based on their annual income.

INCOME BAND NAME	INCOME
Mirco	Less than £10,000
Small	£10,000 to £100,000
Medium	£100,000 to £1m
Large	£1m to £10m
Major	£10m to £100m

AIMS OF THE REPORT

This report aims to increase awareness of the issues affecting trustee recruitment and retention. It provides insights into the impact trustee vacancies have on boards and the work they do to serve communities.

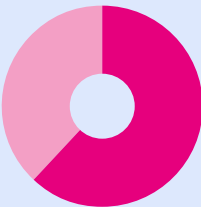
We will use the findings to shape our resources, support, and campaigning. We hope you can use it to develop your work and support the invaluable work of trustees.

OVERVIEW OF CHARITY TRUSTEE VACANCIES

Our survey results show trustee vacancies are a widespread issue.



4 out 5 (79%) respondents have at least one vacant board position.

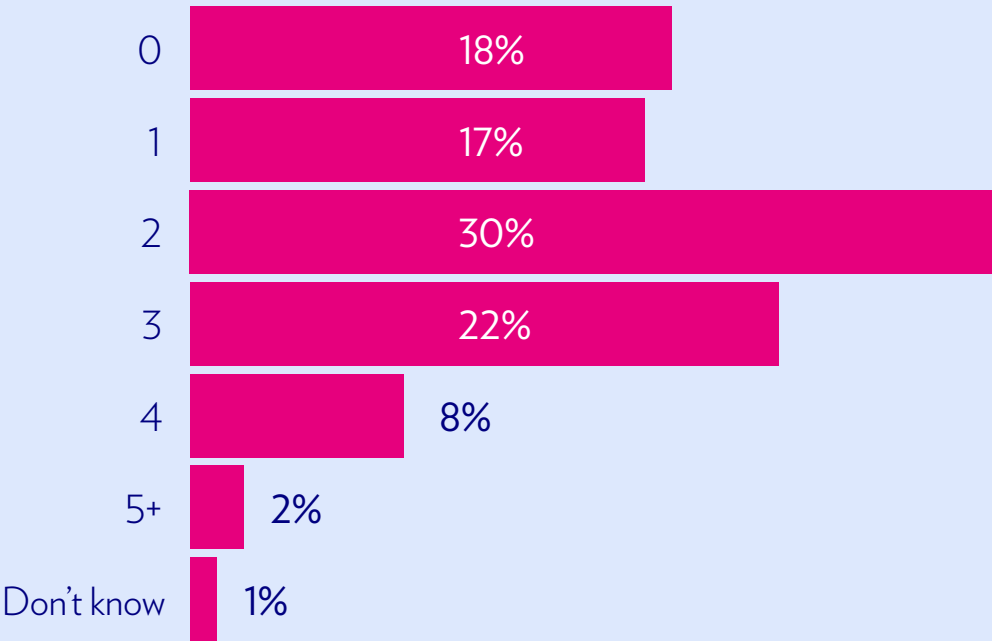


Over half of respondents (62%) had two or more vacancies.

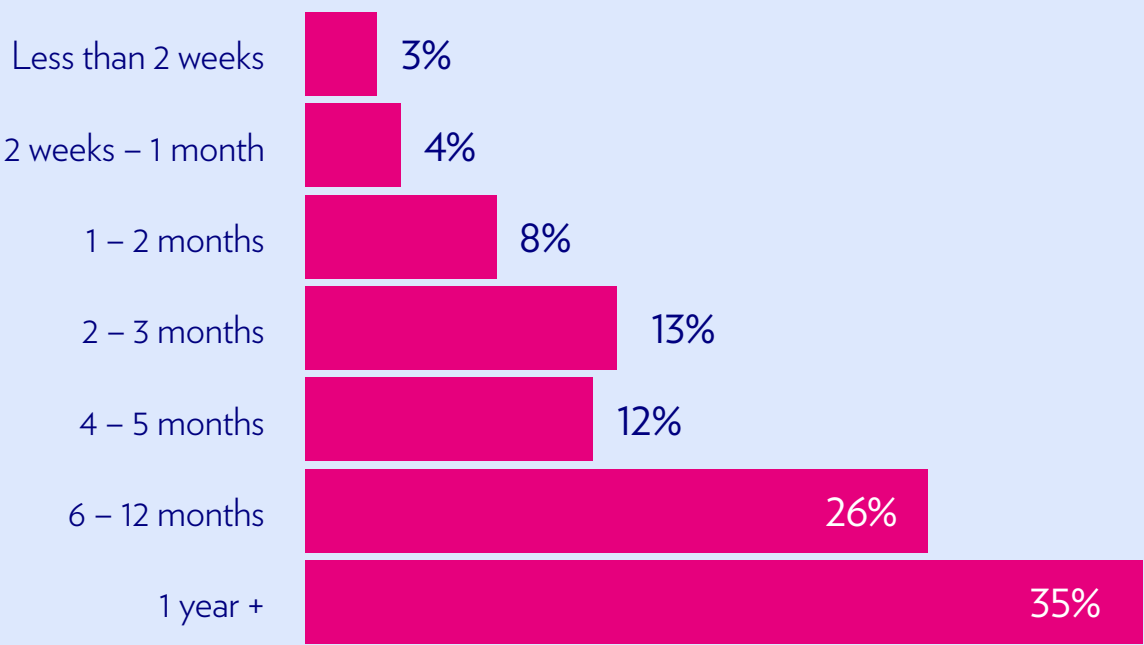


1 in 10 (8%) reported at least four board positions open.

NUMBER OF TRUSTEE BOARD VACANCIES

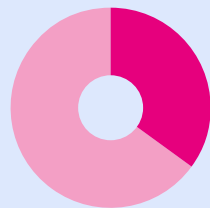


DURATION OF CURRENT BOARD VACANCIES



LENGTH OF VACANCIES

As well as being widespread, the issue is also long-lasting.



Over a third (35%) of respondents have had at least one vacancy for more than a year.



3 out of 5 (61%) respondents have had at least one vacancy for more than six months.

IMPACT ON SMALLER CHARITIES

Of the 35% of charities with vacancies for more than a year:

- 54% are small charities
- 13% are micro charities.

Of the 61% of charities with vacancies for more than 6 months, 60% are small and micro charities.

Micro and small charities tend to be run by volunteers. Trustees are often involved in day-to-day operations as well as strategic decision-making. Micro charities are more likely to have smaller boards, so trustee vacancies have a bigger impact.

IMPACT OF RECENT EVENTS

While some trustee vacancies will be a result of a natural churn, two thirds (65%) of charities have had a vacancy for at least six months.

Over the last year, charities were forced to navigate a challenging external environment. This may have added pressure and contributed to a rise in trustee vacancies.

Trustees have been forced to make difficult financial decisions to ensure their organisation’s financial sustainability. These have been influenced by:

- high inflation
- increasing operating costs
- rising rent costs
- government contracts not increasing in line with inflation.

Charities faced increased scrutiny on what they said and campaigned on in the lead up to the summer elections. Trustees had to strike a difficult balance between making the most of political opportunities and maintaining objectivity.



IMPACT OF TRUSTEE VACANCIES ON CHARITIES

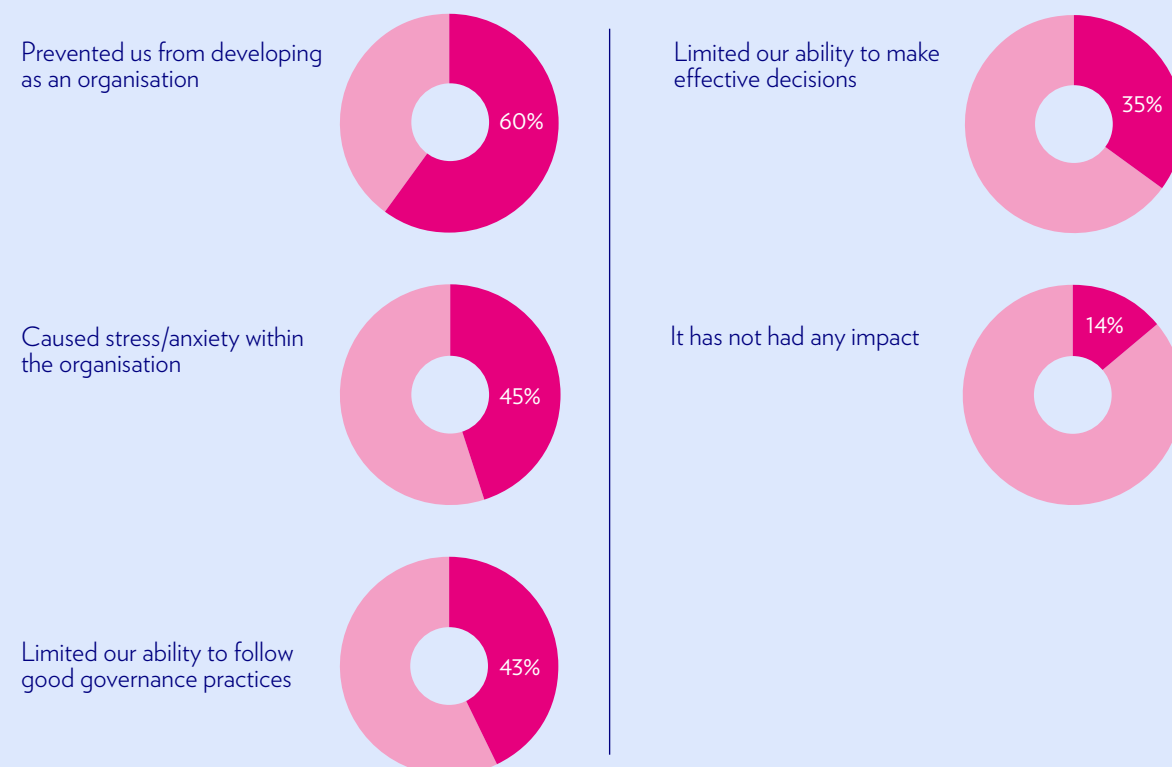
Our survey results show that board vacancies have multiple effects on organisations and individuals.

- 60% of charities say board vacancies are preventing them from developing as an organisation.
- 4 in 10 (43%) say vacancies are limiting their ability to follow good governance practices.
- A third (35%) say vacancies are limiting their ability to make effective decisions.

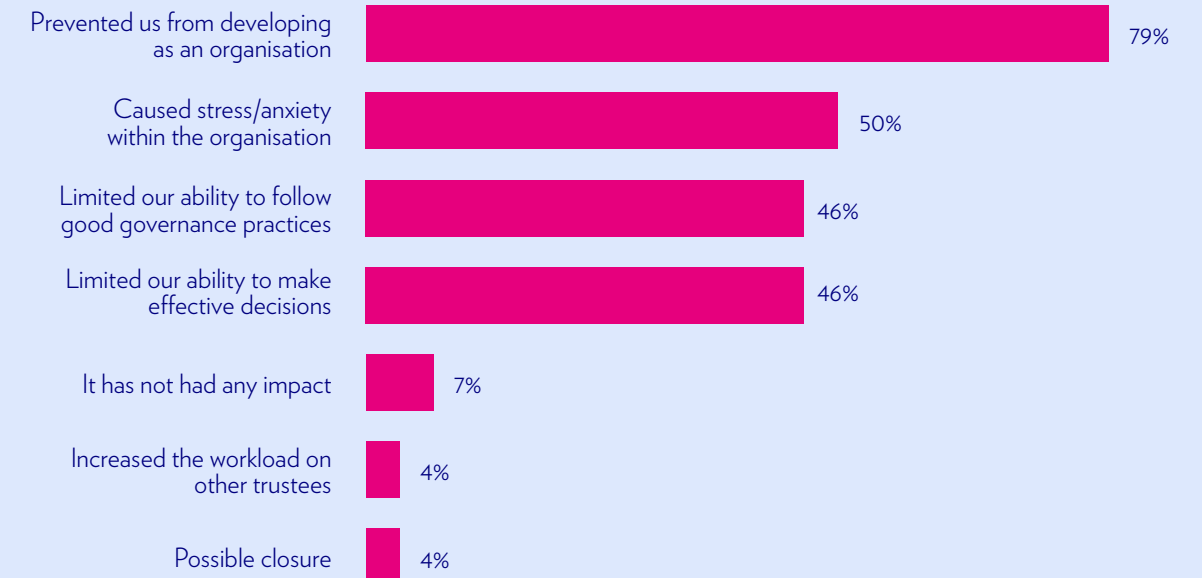
These issues increase for micro charities.

- 80% of micro charities say board vacancies are preventing them from developing as an organisation.
- Almost half of micro charities (46%) say vacancies are limiting their ability to follow good governance practices and make effective decisions.
- 50% of micro charities say vacancies are causing stress and anxiety.

IMPACT OF BOARD VACANCIES ON ORGANISATIONS



IMPACT OF BOARD VACANCIES ON MICRO CHARITIES



Micro charities are more likely to have smaller boards, so trustee vacancies have a much bigger impact. This can be seen in the survey results.

It's understandable that the biggest impact of board vacancies is on organisations' ability to develop. Boards set the direction and strategy for their charity. Boards with a range of skills, knowledge and perspectives can innovate and respond to changes in the external environment.

“For our organisation, receiving support to develop a clear strategic direction was key to the success of a recent funding application. The funder praised the clarity and focus of our proposal, which ultimately led to the recommendation and subsequent approval. Without this clear direction, we wouldn't have been able to communicate our vision as effectively.”

PRIYA SAHNI-NICHOLAS,
THE EQUALITY TRUST

HELP AND SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

Good governance can help trustees address strategic and operational problems. Following best practice will give your charitable objectives a clear focus. It will also support the long-term sustainability of your organisation.

[READ OUR GOVERNANCE HELP AND GUIDANCE](#)

If trustees are unsure about a challenge or issue they should seek expert advice.

NCVO works with a range of trusted suppliers who can offer support, guidance, and advice on a range of areas including HR and legal matters.

Learn more about our trusted suppliers

Our strategy consultants can help trustee boards define their ambitions and develop strategies to navigate a changing world.

Learn more about our strategy consultancy services

HELP AND SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

Governance can sometimes feel complicated. Having clear structures and processes in place will minimise the stress for trustees. You may find it useful to carry out a governance review.

Trustees often have to make difficult decisions. Use the Charity Commission’s **seven decision-making principles** to reduce stress and increase confidence in final decisions. In larger organisations, trustees could also agree on a work calendar and use working groups or sub-committees.

GUIDANCE ON MAKING GOOD DECISIONS AS A BOARD

STRESS AND ANXIETY

Stress and anxiety was the second highest recorded impact (45%) of trustee vacancies.

The negative impact on wellbeing increases as organisation income level decreases.

Half of micro charities (50%) say trustee vacancies cause stress. This increases to 58% for small charities.

In contrast, only 11% of large and major charities said that board vacancies were causing stress and anxiety.

This may be because large and major charity boards often have more trustees and greater structure. This means they are better able to absorb the impact of a vacancy and delegate tasks among a wider team. They also have better financial resources so can afford to pay for extra guidance and support.

SKILLS GAPS

We found several common skills gaps across various fields.

- Almost half (49%) of survey respondents are missing marketing and communications skills.
- 2 in 5 (41%) are lacking legal skills.
- 41% are missing technology skills.
- Over a third (35%) reported a lack of financial expertise.

SKILLS CURRENTLY MISSING FROM BOARDS



INCOME SIZE BREAKDOWN

Skill gaps differ depending on the level of income.

The most common skills gaps for large and major charities are:	The most common skills gaps for small and medium charities are:	The most common skills gaps for micro charities are:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. technology skills (35%)2. artificial intelligence (29%)3. human resources/people management (27%)4. public affairs (27%).	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. marketing and communications (55%)2. legal (46%)3. technology skills (43%)4. financial (36%)5. human resources/people management (36%).	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. marketing and communications (46%)2. governance (39%)3. financial (37%)4. legal (34%)5. technology (34%).



Skills gaps appear to be connected to the different charity structures related to income.

It's more common for smaller charities to be run by volunteers. This means they often need staff from their board to help with operational tasks such as communications and marketing.

Most large and major charities employ staff. Boards need to consider staff in decision-making, which requires HR and people management skills.

According to the **Charity Digital Skills Report 2024**, 62% of charities say their trustees' digital skills are low or could improve. This can also be seen in the high prevalence of technology skills gaps found in our survey.

Charities' perceptions may also play a part. Charities might think they need certain skills for their board, but this isn't always the case.

For example, charities may report needing legal skills because they often access legal advice and support. They may think holding that knowledge within their board could be a benefit.

But it may also be a symptom of the charity believing they're required to have legal expertise on their board. This isn't the case. The Charity Commission doesn't specify any skills or knowledge required on boards. Instead, they expect the charity to identify the mix of skills, knowledge and experience which will be most valuable in decision-making.

HELP AND SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

If trustees are concerned skills are missing on their board, a skills audit is a useful starting point.

Skills audits are a way of collecting information about the qualities of each trustee. They can help you avoid making assumptions about why a trustee has joined the board and what they can offer.

NCVO members can download our trustee skills audit tool.



“

As chair of our board, I prioritise good governance practices through regular monitoring of the skills and competencies across our team. We conduct an annual trustee skills audit, where board members appraise their skills and knowledge. This process helps us understand our board's ability to respond effectively and highlights any skills gaps, allowing us to target recruitment as needed.”

**KATIE BRADSHAW, CHAIR,
RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE COUNSELLING CENTRE
- DARLINGTON AND CO. DURHAM**

**NOT A MEMBER?
JOIN TODAY**



TRUSTEE RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Trustee recruitment is challenging for all charities. But it's worse for micro and small charities.

68% of micro charities said it was very difficult to fill vacancies. 24% said it was somewhat difficult.

57% of small charities said it was very difficult to fill vacancies. 34% said it was somewhat difficult.

45% of medium charities said it was very difficult to fill vacancies. 34% said it was somewhat difficult.

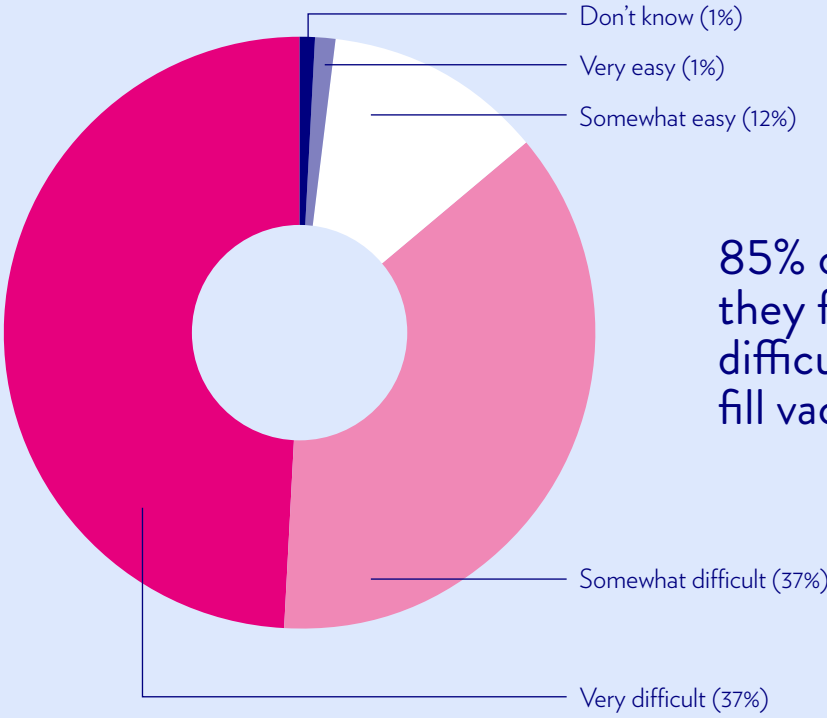
18% of large and major charities said it was very difficult to fill vacancies. 57% said it was somewhat difficult.

It may be harder for micro and small charities to fill vacancies as they're not as well-known as larger charities.

This means they have less reach when advertising vacancies. They also have fewer people to provide administrative support when recruiting a trustee.

Boards often struggle to find the right candidates when recruiting. It can seem daunting to run a broad recruitment campaign, especially for volunteer-led charities. However, being more open can help attract a diverse group of passionate and knowledgeable applicants.

DIFFICULTY FILLING VACANCIES ON BOARDS



85% of respondents said they found it somewhat difficult or very difficult to fill vacancies on their board.

BOARD DIVERSITY

Our survey data on board diversity reflects issues in the wider volunteering sphere. When asked which areas respondents were most concerned about:

- 61% said age and under-representation of young people
- half (50%) said ethnicity
- over a third (35%) said disability
- 3 in 10 (31%) said a lack of technical skills
- around a quarter (24%) said a lack of knowledge.

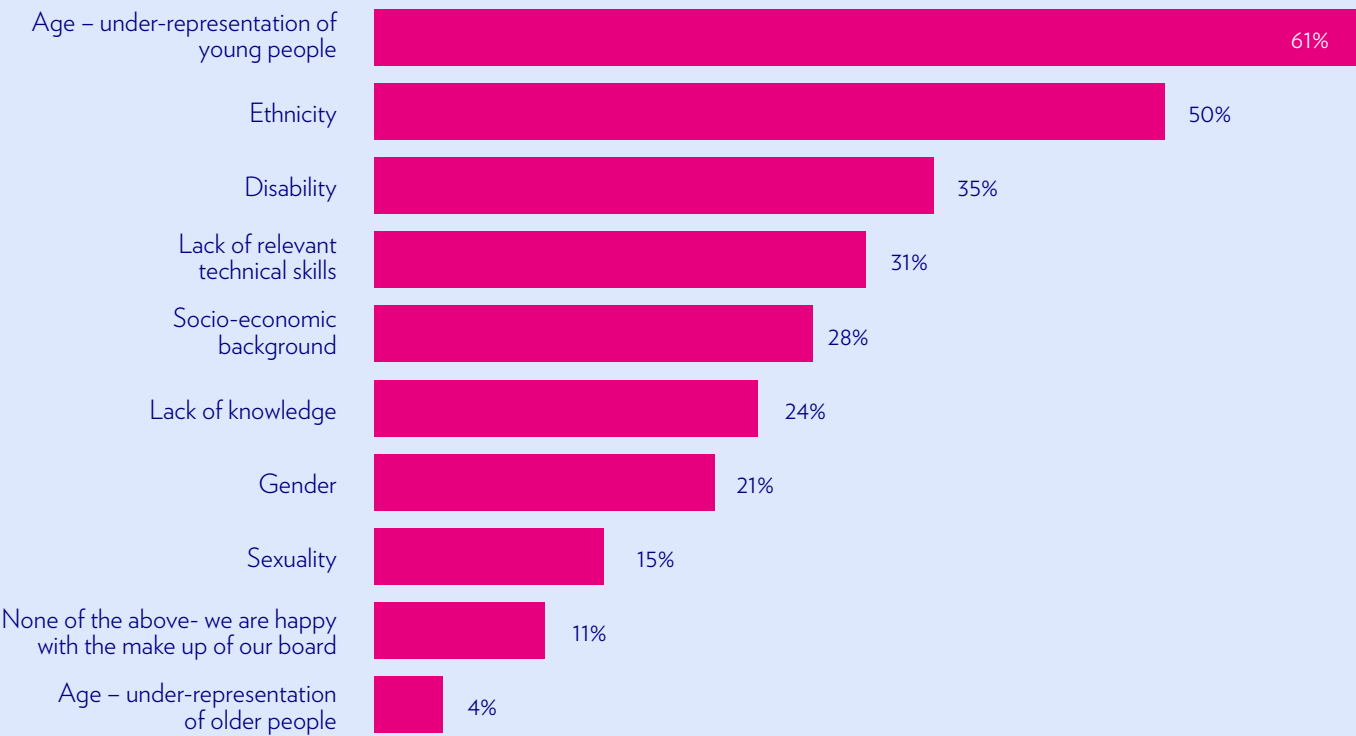
These concerns mirror trends and patterns seen in wider volunteer demographics and board make up.

Time Well Spent 2022 shows us that trustees are more likely to be over 55 and white compared to volunteers overall. This make up is not representative of the wider population. This means trustee boards are often not representative of the groups they seek to serve and benefit.

TRUSTEE DEMOGRAPHICS COMPARED TO OVERALL VOLUNTEERING DEMOGRAPHICS AND THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF GREAT BRITAIN.

	TRUSTEES	VOLUNTEERS	DEMOGRAPHICS OF GREAT BRITAIN
White	92%	91%	83%
Global majority	6%	7%	17%
Disabled	31%	34%	24%
Not disabled	67%	64%	76%
Male	45%	48%	49%
Female	55%	53%	51%
18-24	7%	10%	8%
25-34	8%	14%	13%
55+	57%	42%	32%

AREAS OF CONCERN ON THE MAKE UP AND DIVERSITY OF BOARDS



A lack of relevant technical skills was the second biggest concern for micro charities (45%). This may be because micro charities are more commonly run by volunteers. This makes them more reliant on trustees for operational guidance.

Ethnicity is the top concern for large and major charities (65%). These charities tend to have professional boards and need trustees to be from senior positions. Many industries have racial bias at a senior level. This means large and major charities are searching for trustees within an already limited pool.

Time Well Spent 2023: Volunteering among the global majority found that trustees from the global majority are most likely to be trustees in the following areas:

- health, disability and social welfare (22%)
- religion (21%)
- local community or neighbourhood group (19%).

Micro or small charities often cover these areas. This may be one of the reasons why ethnicity is not a top concern for smaller charities.

HELP AND SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

18–24-year-olds can bring enthusiasm and fresh perspectives to boards. Being on a board also provides young trustees with valuable experiences and skills. Younger trustees often have the most up-to-date skills and knowledge from recent qualifications.

Young Trustees Movement can help connect you with young people for your board.

Having a diverse board:

- exposes bias
- enriches discussions
- helps decision-making
- boosts a charity’s legitimacy and impact.

Use our guidance to begin reflecting on equality, diversity and inclusion at board level.

EXPECTED LEAVERS

According to **Time Well Spent 2023**, leaders/trustees are more likely to say they will continue volunteering over the next 12 months compared to volunteers overall (85% vs 71%).

Yet 55% of respondents to our survey expect at least one or two trustees to leave their post in the next 12 months.

Some of this will be part of natural turnover, with trustees coming to the end of their term. However, over half of respondents said they already have at least two vacancies. So the anticipated loss of trustees suggests this issue could get worse.



HELP AND SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

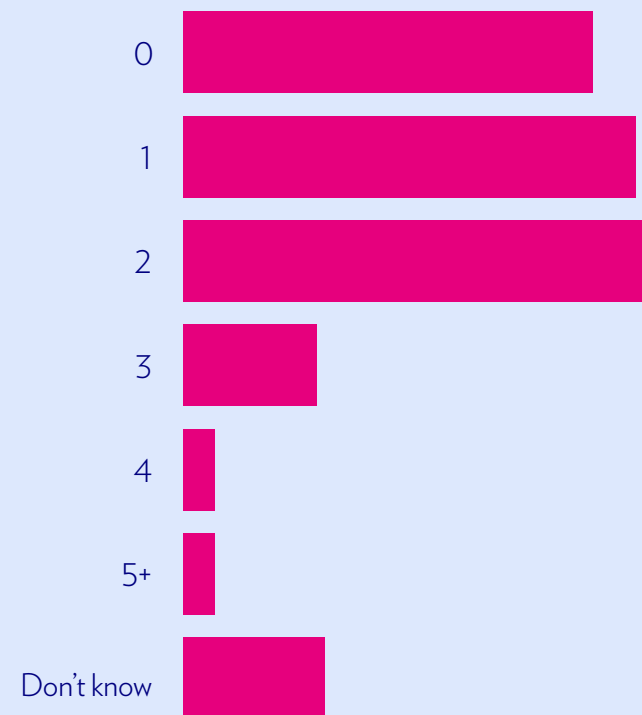
Boards should create a succession plan to ensure a smooth leaving process.

A succession plan is a clear action plan for recruiting future trustees. It's based on the organisation's strategy and helps manage potential risks.

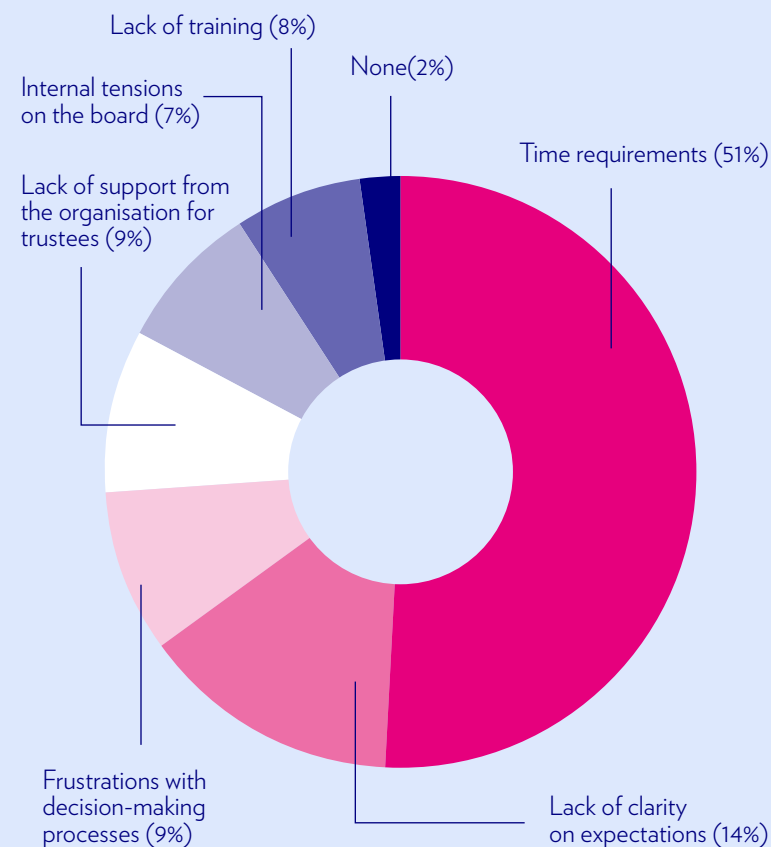
[Learn more about succession planning](#)



NUMBER OF TRUSTEES EXPECTED TO LEAVE THEIR POSITION IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS



IMPACTS TO TRUSTEE RETENTION



RETENTION ISSUES

'Time requirements' was the top trustee retention issue reported by respondents (51%). 'Lack of clarity on expectations' is second (14%).

These findings match our **Time Well Spent 2023** data. Time Well Spent found leaders/trustees were more likely than volunteers overall to say:

- they felt pressured to do more than they would have liked (15% vs 10%)
- too much of their time has been taken up with their role (20% vs 13%).



HELP AND SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

Ensuring meetings are accessible and efficient can help reduce time requirements.

[Learn more about running good meetings](#)

An agreed code of conduct for meetings can help trustees address internal tensions and frustrations.

[Read our guidance on dealing with problems and disputes between trustees.](#)

It's important to invest in trustee training to ensure trustees have the right tools and skills.

[Browse our upcoming governance training.](#)



SOLUTIONS AND ENABLERS

93% of respondents said more needs to be done to encourage people to become trustees. This response was consistent for all respondents regardless of income level.

When asked what could be done to encourage more people to become trustees, 57% suggested celebrating the impact of trustees followed by targeted outreach from organisations to specific groups (56%), clearer communication on the benefits of being a trustee (52%), and better help and guidance on how to become a trustee (50%).

The results are mostly consistent across different income levels. But there are some differences.

‘Targeted outreach to specific groups’ and ‘providing paid time off to volunteer’ were the top two choices for large and major charities.

What could be done to encourage more people to be trustee – large and major charities response.

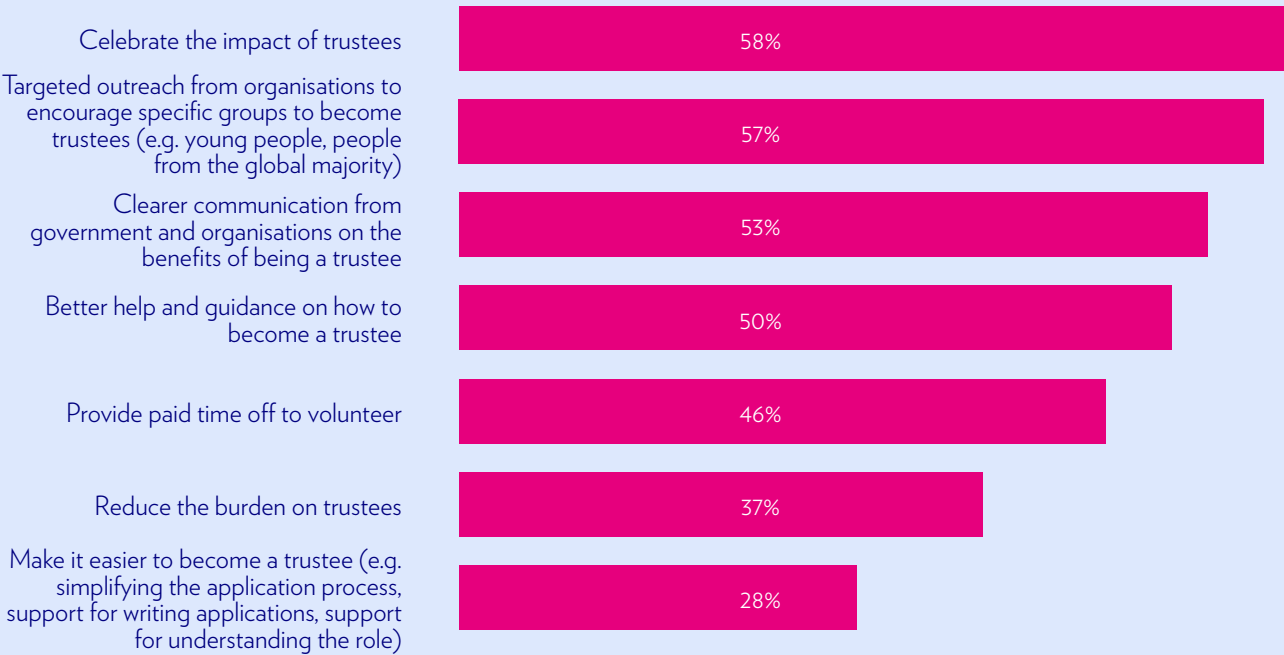
Targeted outreach aligns with diversity concerns reported by large charities.

Large and major charities are more likely to have working professionals on their boards. These trustees would benefit from paid time off work to do their trustee duties.

‘Reducing the burden on trustees’ was the fourth most selected option by micro charities.

Micro charity trustees handle both operational and strategic tasks. This may be why ‘reducing burdens’ ranks higher for them.

WHAT COULD BE DONE TO ENCOURAGE MORE PEOPLE TO BE TRUSTEES



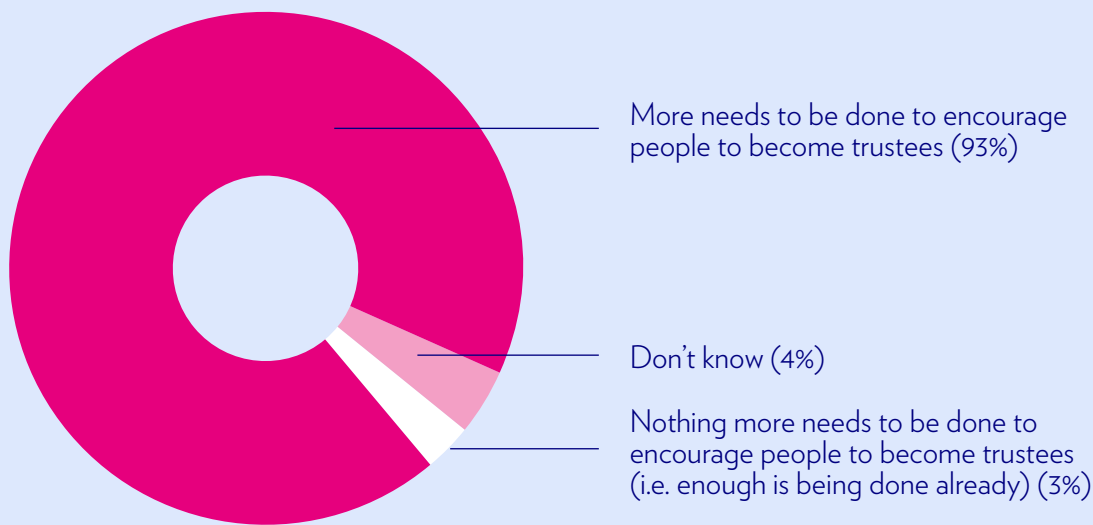
LARGE AND MAJOR CHARITIES

1. Targeted outreach (65%)
2. Providing time off to volunteer (59%)
3. Celebrating the impact of trustees (55%)
4. Better help and guidance (49%)
5. Clearer communication from government (49%)
6. Reducing the burden on trustees (37%)
7. Make it easier to become a trustee (25%)

MICRO CHARITIES

1. Celebrating the impact of trustees (60%)
2. Targeted outreach (60%)
3. Clearer communication from government (55%)
4. Reducing the burden on trustees (43%)
5. Better help and guidance (40%)
6. Providing time off to volunteer (35%)
7. Make it easier to become a trustee (33%)

WHETHER MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ENCOURAGE TRUSTEE RETENTION



HELP AND SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

Reviewing recruitment and induction processes can reduce the burden on trustees.

Inductions help new trustees:

- get up to speed with the role
- understand the organisation
- get familiar with their legal duties.

It's also important trustees understand the role they are signing up for. Clear role descriptions outlining the responsibilities, time commitments, and skills your need make a big difference.

NCVO members can download our sample trustee role descriptions.

LEARN MORE ABOUT RECRUITING AND INDUCTING TRUSTEES



REFLECTIONS AND FURTHER SUPPORT

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Trustee vacancies are a widespread and persistent issue. This is mostly due to recruitment rather than retention challenges. Once in position, trustees tend to remain longer than other volunteers.

Trustee vacancies impact both organisations and individuals. They lead to difficulties in decision-making, following good governance practices, and organisational development.

Vacancies can create stress and anxiety for trustees. Trustees often feel pressured to do extra work. This only gets worse as trustees leave and organisations struggle to find replacements.

But there are steps boards can take to address these challenges.

IMPROVE GOVERNANCE PRACTICES

Governance can sometimes seem complicated or feel like a tick box exercise. But having clear structures and processes can streamline recruitment and reduce stress.

Well-governed trustee boards can build a more resilient, inclusive, and impactful charity sector.

DIVERSIFY RECRUITMENT

By targeting specific groups, organisations can access new talent pools. For example, young people, skilled professionals, or underrepresented communities.

PROVIDE CLEAR ROLE DESCRIPTIONS

You can help trustees understand the role they're committing to by providing clear role descriptions.

Role descriptions should outline the responsibilities, time commitments and skills you need.

CELEBRATE TRUSTEES

As a sector, we need to do more to encourage people to become trustees. We should celebrate the contributions of trustees to our sector. We can do this by sharing their stories and experiences.

We need to be clear about the benefits of trusteeship. Whether it's personal growth, making a difference, or developing new skills. There is a lot to gain from becoming a trustee.

HELP AND GUIDANCE

We offer help and guidance for trustees at every stage of their governance journey.

[What is governance?](#)

[Making decisions as a board](#)

[Responsibilities for boards](#)

[Improving your work as a board](#)

[Managing board relationships](#)

[Carrying out a governance review](#)

[Board basics](#)

[Financial procedures manual](#)

RESOURCES FOR NCVO MEMBERS

NCVO members can download the following sample templates and resources.

[Board meeting agenda template](#)

[Trustee code of conduct sample](#)

[Role descriptions for trustees](#)

[Governance wheel assessment tool](#)

[Trustee recruitment pack for small organisations](#)

[Trustee skills audit](#)

[Individual trustee self-reflection](#)

TRAINING COURSES AND WEBINARS

We run training courses and webinars for trustees. They cover a variety of topics including fundraising and safeguarding.

[Browse upcoming governance training](#)

CONSULTANCY

Our consultancy team can help you tackle governance challenges. They have experience delivering governance reviews and training for a diverse range of clients. This includes well-known national charities and small local community groups.

[Learn how our consultancy can help you](#)

TRUSTED SUPPLIERS

Our trusted suppliers can help save your organisation time and money. They provide exceptional value and outstanding quality. All our suppliers have lots of experience working with voluntary organisations.

[Find out more about our trusted suppliers](#)

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