Young people as trustees

Young people are under-represented on the boards of charities. Their experience, perspective and enthusiasm mean they have a great deal to contribute, and not just to charities ‘for’ young people.

The Commission wants to encourage charities to think seriously about the benefits of involving young people.

Involving young people: how to do it successfully

1. Charities need to take the lead in addressing under-representation of young people on their boards. Involving young people in governance can benefit charities, particularly those that serve young people - they have experience, understanding and enthusiasm to contribute. Other kinds of charities can benefit as well, for example, older people may face similar issues of age-related prejudice.

2. There are different ways of involving young people in governance - as full board members, advisors or as representatives of users or “young people” generally. These different forms of involvement carry different expectations of what young people will contribute - a user’s or a young person’s perspective, or a range of expertise and experience like any other charity trustee. Charities and young people need to agree and be clear about the reasons for their involvement.

3. Young people who join boards need support, such as mentoring, clear board papers, good chairing involving active questioning and listening. This kind of support would help any new charity trustee.

4. It’s best to focus on young people’s skills and experience, rather than assuming that they “represent” their peers. It is too easy to fall into a tokenistic approach to diversity. Boards also need to think widely about diversity. Some young people, such as those with disabilities or brought up in care, are more likely to be overlooked or excluded.

5. Cultural change takes time and preparation and involves effort by everyone involved. “Parachuting” young people onto the board may not be the best way to start. By involving young people in other ways first, the organisation can develop the listening and supporting skills it needs, while young people can develop the skills they need to become board members.

6. Young people who are already involved in governance, for example, in clubs at schools, colleges or universities, should be encouraged to continue in governance after they leave formal education. We need to find effective ways of connecting them to organisations who want to involve young people in governance, and not lose their valuable skills and experience.

Trustees under 18
For some youth organisations it may be appropriate for young people under 18 to be on the board, and the Commission is supportive of the wishes of charities who wish to have some people under 18 on the board to ensure appropriate user representation.

Broadly, a charity can currently take one of three legal forms - a company, a trust or an unincorporated association. The directors of a charitable company are its charity trustees. Under company law (since October 2008), the minimum age for directors is 16. The trustees of a trust or of an unincorporated association are in a different position because under trust law the minimum age for trustees is 18.

If you have decided that it is appropriate for your charity to appoint someone under 18 to be a trustee, the charity must be formed as a company limited by guarantee. You particularly need to think about the following issues.

- Check your Articles of Association to ensure that there isn't a clause preventing anyone under 18 from being a director of the company. If there is, this clause will need to be amended (following any specific procedures set out in the Articles).
- You should consider carefully what restrictions, for practical reasons, should be placed on the total number of charity trustees who can be under 18. The decision should be taken in the light of the specific circumstances of each charity. This should take into account the scale of the charity, the complexity of its activities and governance, and the range of skills and experience required on the charity trustee board.
- Ensure that prospective trustees are aware of their duties and responsibilities before they are appointed. This is important for all prospective charity trustees, not just those under 18.
- In some circumstances parents can be liable for the actions of their children. Parental liability would only normally arise where the parent has become involved in the running of the charity by encouraging the child to do or not to do something. We advise that parents of under 18s who are invited to become the director of a charitable company, are made aware of the duties and responsibilities of being a director, before appointment.
- If the charitable company has taken out insurance against the consequences, for the charity, of a breach of duty by the director, the insurance might not cover directors who are under 18 and this is something to check with the insurer.

The Commission would welcome further opportunities to discuss and develop sector thinking around involving young people in charities.

Other Sources of information

Youthnet (external link), the voluntary youth network for Northern Ireland, is an independent agency, which represents the interests and aspirations of more than 70 voluntary youth organisations.