



It starts from the top

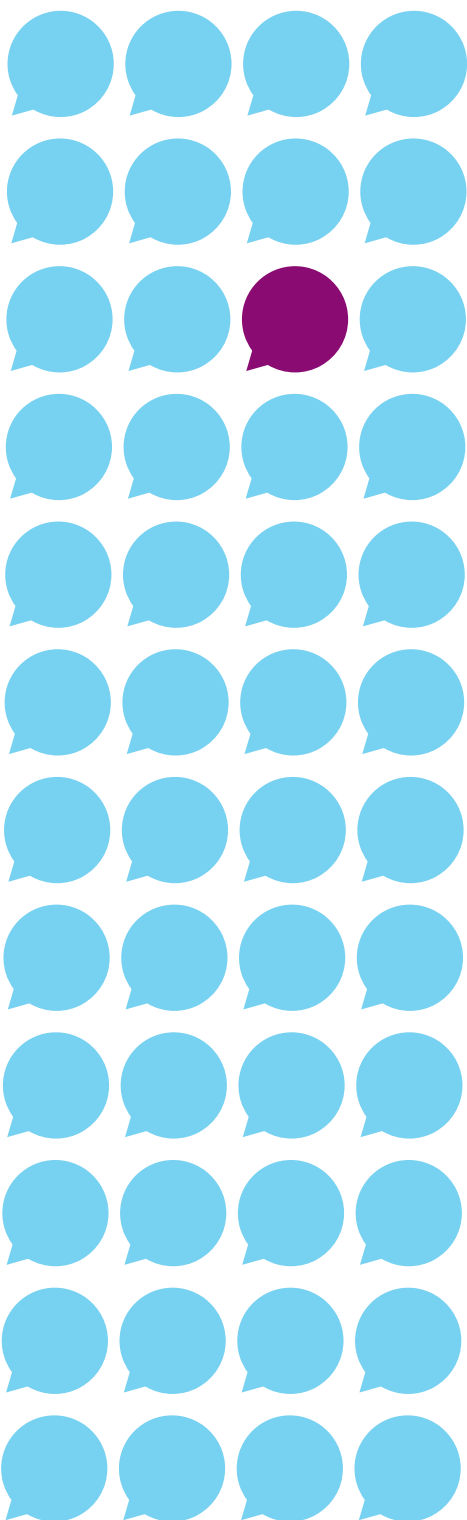
Reflections and recommendations on equity, diversity and inclusion for charity and non-profit chairs and boards



**Association
of
Chairs**

Effective chair
Effective board
Effective non-profit

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About this guide

Where do you currently find yourself and your board in relation to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)?

Confident or confused?
Fearful of offending, or keen to discover more?

Our recent EDI survey of chairs, trustees and senior leaders revealed a mixed picture of how board leaders feel about and are tackling EDI at board level.

While over 30% of respondents said they felt “knowledgeable”, “confident”, “curious”, and around half said they felt “enthusiastic” and “motivated”, there were also those who reported feeling “unsure”, “worried”, “fearful”, “uninformed”, “out of date” and “confused.”

Wherever you are on your EDI journey with your board, we hope this guide will help you. The Association of Chairs wanted to develop a resource for chairs and boards which was informative, awareness-raising, and encouraging. We wanted to open up new ideas and avenues for discussion among chairs, board leaders and trustees. We felt strongly that the best way to do this would be to amplify the voices of those with lived experience, who could talk authentically about EDI from their own perspectives, and from their experiences as chairs and board members.

This guide therefore contains a collection of personal reflections from chairs with lived experience of different communities and backgrounds. Within the guide you’ll also find tips and recommended resources from chairs, trustees and senior leaders who responded to our 2024 EDI survey.

One clear theme that runs throughout this resource is of the power and impact that even small changes can have. We want to encourage you that you can make many effective changes to develop more inclusive practices for your board, that don’t cost a lot of money or even time.

With many aspects of inclusion, it’s not necessarily a big budget that you need, but a willingness to learn, an open mind, thoughtfulness, care, and commitment. All of which are free and present among the board leaders and board members of the smallest charities to the largest.

Having a diverse board with inclusive practices is entirely possible and inherently valuable, and sets an example to the rest of your organisation about what EDI looks like in practice. EDI is a whole-board responsibility that we can all play a part in.

It starts from the top. It involves us all.

All resources and links and references were accessed and checked in autumn 2024.

What does it all mean?

Useful definitions

Sometimes the quickly evolving language around EDI can feel confusing. Here are some simple definitions. We haven't provided an in-depth glossary in this guide, as there are other resources which cover language more thoroughly.

Equity: This means providing the resources or opportunities that people need to help them access equal outcomes. Rather than simply providing the same to everyone (equality), equity means that some people might need adjustments to help level the playing field. For example, providing a document to a group of people that is the same format for everyone = equality. But providing the same document in large font to one person with sight loss and printing it out for another who doesn't have the resources to access it online = equity.

Diversity: Celebrating that people are all different, from different backgrounds and life experiences. Diversity of experience and diversity of thought all add to the richness of our relationships and can grow and enhance our lives, personally and professionally.

Inclusion: Creating an environment where everyone feels welcomed, included and valued.

Recommended resources:

- » [Directory of Social Change language guidance](#)
- » [NCVO equity, diversity and inclusion guide](#)

A note about language: This guide was written and produced in 2024. We know that language and thinking around EDI evolves over time. We will endeavour to keep this guide as up to date as possible.

The current context for charity and non-profit boards

The current picture of EDI across charity boards is one of gradual improvements, but progress is still slow. Chairs and their board members are more often than not drawn from a narrow section of society.

- » 29% of charities have all-white boards¹
- » 51% of charities do not have a single minority ethnic woman on their board²
- » 92% of charity trustees are white³
- » 71% of chairs are male, and 64% of all trustees are male⁴

There is nothing wrong with older, white men being on boards. The problem is where boards are so skewed to this one particular demographic, they lose out on the perspectives and experiences that could add to and enrich their thinking and their decision-making.

In order to change this picture, the barriers which prevent greater diversity on boards must be recognised and dismantled. For some, there might be financial barriers to taking on an unpaid role with no right to paid time off. For others they may not feel like the role of chair or trustee is for them because they do not see people like them reflected in the current board. Others may find the application process inaccessible, or find the timing or format of board meetings is done in a way which means they won't be able to participate effectively, or in some cases, at all. Even if you manage to get a range of applications, you may find it hard to retain them if those barriers remain in place.

We hope this guide will help you to review your own practices, find those barriers, and take positive action towards removing them.

A rich variety of perspectives, experiences, and opinions will make for more effective boards and more effective charities, which are better able to meet the needs of those they serve.

Ultimately, having more diverse and inclusive boards will make the charity and non-profit sector better, more resilient, more equitable and more representative of the general public, and that benefits everyone.

Your experiences:

“It’s made a huge difference having diversity on the board, to our strategic thinking, to supporting and stretching the executive, to listening and decision-making in board meetings.”

Survey respondent, 2024

¹ <https://www.inclusiveboards.co.uk/resource/charities-inclusive-governance-report-2022/>

² <https://www.inclusiveboards.co.uk/resource/charities-inclusive-governance-report-2022/>

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82c62eed915d74e6237913/20171113_Taken_on_Trust_awareness_and_effectiveness_of_charity_trustees.pdf

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82c62eed915d74e6237913/20171113_Taken_on_Trust_awareness_and_effectiveness_of_charity_trustees.pdf

About the Association of Chairs

Chairing a charity or non-profit is unique, rewarding, and demanding. Your role is vital, because effective board leadership, and effective boards, are crucial for creating resilient, thriving charities.

We're here for all chairs in all their diversity – no matter how big or small your non-profit is, no matter where you are on your chairing journey.

Our membership includes vice chairs, co-chairs, and former chairs. We understand the challenges of chairing and are here to help.

We offer:

Community – the chance to be part of a unique, collaborative network of chairs, vice-chairs, co-chairs, and committee chairs, new and experienced, from organisations small and large. Our community meets online, in person, and on social media, with opportunities to ask questions and get support.

Bespoke resources – access to our guides, tools, newsletters and blogs, written by chairs, for chairs. Our resources are focused on the unique demands of the chairing role, and help you to tackle those tricky issues that crop up time and time again.

Training – the opportunity to attend many varied training events, workshops, and webinars throughout the year, on topics that chairs tell us they want to explore more.

We are the only membership organisation focused on chairs. We would love for you to join us and be part of our collaborative community.

Visit our website associationofchairs.org.uk for details of how to join.

Acknowledgements

This guide is nothing without the contributions of the authors, who all willingly shared their thoughts and reflections. We are very grateful to them.

- » Peter Beresford, Chair, Shaping Our Lives
- » Mita Desai, co-CEO, Young Trustees Movement
- » Malcolm John, Founder, Action for Trustee Racial Diversity
- » Neal Mankey, Chair, ADHD UK
- » Yatin Mistry, Chair, LGBT+ Consortium
- » Rashmi Rungta, Association of Chairs trustee and experienced board member across multiple organisations

Inclusive involvement must be front and centre

By Peter Beresford, Chair, Shaping Our Lives

It sometimes feels that it's easier to point out the barriers in a society like ours, than the opportunities. So it's great that we have what are called protected characteristics under the Equality Act, for example, in relation to gender, disability, ethnicity, sexuality and so on. Even so, the evidence indicates that hate crime is rising and minorities feel increasingly unsafe. One of the sad things too is that participatory arrangements that seek to compensate for the inequalities in our society themselves often mirror prevailing exclusions.

So when the disabled people's/user-led organisation I chair, Shaping Our Lives, carried out a national study of who gets left out of participatory arrangements, *The Usual Suspects*, we found that there were even more barriers than the need for 'protected characteristics' would suggest. This included people who were excluded who lived in residential services, who communicated differently, were seen as 'too disabled' to involve or were just stereotyped as 'difficult'.

I have to say that from a lifetime working to increase participation, I have yet to meet a person who, given the chance, couldn't in some way make clear what they wanted and make a contribution, but this might well need to be done in a much more imaginative and sensitive way than the usual questionnaires and surveys. As voluntary organisations, we need to be thinking how we can work in more equal and anti-discriminatory ways if we truly want inclusive involvement.

Sadly the voluntary sector, which prides itself on being a radical force for positive change, sometimes reflects these same exclusions. So here are a few tips from our research findings which may help.

Top tips:

Reach out

If you truly want to involve a diverse range of people in your activities and governance, then don't wait for them to come to you, but reach out to them and their communities. Value and engage with their community leaders but try and reach beyond them too in sensitive and respectful ways.

Reward and recognition

Make involvement in your organisation a positive and valued experience. It's time that charity law recognised that people who need help can also offer it and enabled the reward and recognition that we all have a right to, so that participation extends beyond those fortunate enough to have adequate incomes and loads of 'spare' time.

Inclusive involvement must be front and centre

Renewal and review

To avoid mirroring the worst characteristics of cliques, make sure your governance and involvement is an ongoing and ever-renewing process. To make this possible, offer support, confidence building, training and skill development in appropriate ways to the diversity of potential beneficiaries of your organisation. Their lived experience will be an invaluable addition to your work – if you give them that chance.

Real democracy

Don't confuse formal democracy, with all its jargon of 'point of order', 'minutes' rather than notes, 'seconding' and the rest, with real democracy. Make sure that there is constant explanation and emphasis on the latter rather than the former.

Strong and equal communication

Build strong and equal lines of contact and communication between workers, service users and governance. Challenge modern pressures towards managerialism and give greatest value to your face-to-face workers and service users, and work for overlaps of lived experience.

Access and support

Finally, keep access and support front of mind when recruiting new participants, so they are truly welcome, doors really are open and they have every kind of practical and emotional support to want to stay involved. Personally, I still place an emphasis on ready cups of tea and coffee as well as the occasional cream cakes and other treats.

Inclusive involvement must be front and centre if we want to ensure we have more than a partial approach to inclusion in our voluntary organisations and as members of their boards and leadership.

Recommended resources:

[The Usual Suspects](#), 2013

[Tickboxes and Tokenism? Service User Involvement Report](#), 2022

Shaping Our Lives' blogs and resources contain many practical tips and advice for inclusive meetings which can be used for planning board meetings and events:

- » [Organising inclusive and accessible events](#)
- » [Timing is everything](#)
- » [Accessibility - more than just step free](#)

Of all the areas of diversity and inclusion, chairs, trustees and senior leaders indicated that disability inclusion was their area of least success.

(AoC EDI survey results, October 2024)

Inclusive involvement must be front and centre

Author bio

Peter is the Chair of Shaping Our Lives and a long-term user of mental health services. He has been involved with Shaping Our Lives from the beginning, carrying out research and writing about supporting disabled people and service users to have more say and control over their lives and the services they need.

He is Visiting Professor at the University of East Anglia and Emeritus Professor at Brunel University London and Essex University.

Peter's latest book, written with Colin Slasberg, [The Future of Social Care](#) is published by Edward Elgar and can be obtained FREE as a download.

Your experiences:

“This is a charity for disabled people that is run (trustee-wise) by disabled people and that lived experience flows into the daily work of the organisation.”

Survey respondent 2024

It's not rocket science

By Mita Desai, co-CEO, Young Trustees Movement

As the CEO of the Young Trustees Movement and Chair of Community Action Redbridge, I've seen the incredible difference it makes when boards are truly committed to EDI.

Good governance fosters greater inclusion and belonging, and vice versa. One of the biggest issues I see on boards is the misconception that these elements are mutually exclusive. For instance, the statement, "Having younger trustees is nice in theory but not in practice. Our board can be quite intimidating, even for a CEO with 10 years of experience. So while it's a nice idea, let's recruit people who can handle the boardroom pressure!" reflects a mindset that perpetuates a negative boardroom culture. Another concern is that having younger trustees means the board will be lacking the necessary experience to function effectively (a misconception that we address in our monthly champion training).

In contrast, a more supportive and progressive approach would be: "It might currently be quite intimidating for young people to join our board. We should strive to create a space that is welcoming and fosters psychological safety. How can we achieve this? Let's focus on establishing this environment first and then review our recruitment strategy on x date."

Boards thrive when they take meaningful action. While this journey requires ongoing effort, there are practical steps every board can take to make real progress. Using insights from our Conversations Toolkit and experiences from boards we've worked with, here are some top tips to help your board embed EDI into its practices.

Top tips:

Start with shared values

Before tackling any EDI challenges, it's vital that your board agrees on the values that underpin good governance and the process of keeping themselves accountable to these values. This alignment lays the groundwork for productive conversations about inclusivity and helps trustees hold each other accountable. When the board collectively commits to these values, it creates a strong foundation for constructive conversations.

Prioritise an area of focus

After defining shared values, assess where your board currently stands. For example, by scoring your board's performance against key areas in the Charity Governance Code, you can identify areas that need attention. This gives you a clearer sense of what's working and where there's room for improvement.

For instance, your recruitment processes may not be attracting diverse candidates, or your meeting formats might not be accessible to all. Focusing on one priority at a time allows your board to address issues effectively.

It's not rocket science

Build a vision of success

Once you've identified a priority area, define what success looks like. Being clear about the outcomes you want to achieve helps keep everyone focused.

Ask yourselves:

- » What does success in this area look like for our board?
- » How will achieving this outcome affect our work?
- » What changes do we want to see in the short, medium, and long term?

By agreeing on a shared vision, your board will have a guiding framework to measure progress. It also allows you to develop resilience to overcome barriers and avoid tokenism.

Get curious

Curiosity is key to understanding the root causes of barriers to inclusion. Reflective questioning allows boards to dig deeper into the current situation and identify what's working and what's not.

Consider asking:

- » What's working well in our approach to diversity and inclusion?
- » What's not working, and why?
- » Where are we unsure, and what do we need to understand better?

By getting curious, your board can uncover deeper issues and start to address them meaningfully.

Decide, take action, and review

After reflecting on your situation, it's time to take action. Set clear, actionable goals to help your board move closer to its vision of success. The SMART framework can be particularly useful:

- » Specific: Is the action clearly defined?
- » Measurable: How will you track progress?
- » Achievable: Are the resources in place?
- » Relevant: Does the action address current needs?
- » Time-bound: Can it realistically be achieved by the deadline?

Using the SMART framework ensures that actions are practical and targeted. It's also important to regularly review and assess whether the actions are moving the board closer to its goals.

EDI is a continuous journey

Creating a board culture where all voices are heard and valued is an ongoing commitment. Boards need to repeat these steps, building their 'muscle memory' for inclusivity, so it becomes a natural part of their operations.

The more familiar boards become with these processes, the more instinctive they will be in embedding EDI in governance. This journey isn't just about ticking boxes – it's about creating a board that thrives because it is diverse, inclusive, and reflective of the wider community.

As you will see, this is not rocket science. This framework helps slow down the thinking process; often, we have the answers, but it's about the willingness to use our curiosity to access them. Join us, and together we can build boards that are truly representative, inclusive, and impactful.

It's not rocket science

Recommended resources:

If you want to take your board's commitment to EDI to the next level, you can join the Young Trustees Movement's free monthly Champion Training. In these sessions, they provide practical tools and insights to help you drive change on your board. Participants will also gain access to the Conversations Toolkit Guide.

The Young Trustees Movement also offers:

- » A checklist to support recruitment
- » A posting service to match up supply and demand (this is free for small organisations)
- » In future they are also considering doing online networking events to match supply and demand (there are so many young people that want to join boards - the issue is not in the supply of young people). If you become a champion, you can join the movement and tell them what the movement needs to do next.

All of the above can be found on the [Young Trustees Movement website](#).

Author bio

Mita has over 10 years' experience in the youth sector and youth voice advocacy. She has worked for a variety of organisations including Envision, The University of Birmingham, The Challenge Network and The Social Change Agency. She also holds a BA in Social Policy, has served as Chair of the British Youth Council, sat on the Advisory Board for Step Up To Serve and has mentored youth debating teams. She currently is the Co-CEO of the Young Trustees Movement and the Chair of Community Action Redbridge.

Your experiences:

"Everyone is absolutely up for board diversity - of course - however, finding younger people with the right experiences is tough. The 30-40s don't tend to have the time as still building careers, the younger ones don't apply."

Survey respondent, 2024

What if?

By Malcolm John, Founder, Action for Trustee Racial Diversity (ATRD)

How it often is

What if you were approached informally by a member of your Pilates class who, thinking you'd give a different look to the board, asked if you'd like to join them as a board trustee, leading and being accountable for a million pound charity?

What if you were told that this key role wouldn't involve you in any paid work but you'd be an unpaid volunteer?

What if you were told that you'd be joining a board where nobody looked like you, or went to the sort of state school you did, or they were all university educated, or were all retired and had private means?

What if you were told that all the board meetings would take place in the middle of the afternoon when you were expected to be at work?

What if you were told that your main role on the board would be to lead on equity, diversity and inclusion, even though you had a range of other skills and experience, and that wasn't one of them?

You wake up sharply in a cold sweat. It was only a dream, another metaverse! In real life, things were quite different.

How it could be

You had seen an engaging and inclusive trustee advert on your LinkedIn group or through Young Trustees Movement, Reach Volunteering or Action for Trustee Racial Diversity which was tailor-made for you and your current circumstances. Inclusively, it doesn't ask about your senior management experience, your governance experience or your previous trusteeships.

The advert recognises the lived experience of the charity's issue which you bring. The charity is prepared to look at how they could compensate you for your time or any lost salary because of your trusteeship.

The charity is committed to reviewing its board meeting times so that you can attend at convenient times for you.

They are offering you a buddy from among the existing trustees to steer you on any contentious issues and brief you on how board meetings are run.

The whole board took part in an engaged and productive, externally facilitated, training session on understanding the benefits of EDI and takes a collective approach to discussions and issues on EDI.

You are not the only person from a Black and Asian background joining the board; two others with the required skills advertised for are also joining as trustees.

The board co-chairs have an inclusive approach to their role and are eager to talk to you and get feedback regularly from you about your experiences on the board.

That waking scenario is ATRD's own vision for developing the inclusiveness and sustainability of the charity sector.

What if?

We recognise it's not a quick fix to bridge the significant 6% underrepresentation gap for people from Black and Asian backgrounds on charity trustee boards (currently making up 8% of boards, compared to 14% of the UK's population): 92% of trustees are white, older, and above average income and education. The [most recent McKinsey report](#) highlights the benefits of and impact of diversity. However, the [Inclusive Boards research report in 2022](#) reported limited progress on diversity and inclusion among the top 500 charities by income.

Below is a quick run through of ATRD's key resources that can help to address this challenge. They're not rocket science. We hope that they show you the way to replicate them yourselves!

Recommended resources:

[From here to diversity](#): a practical guide for charities on how to recruit (and retain) Black and Asian trustees, to support those who, whilst keen to diversify their boards, don't know how to go about doing so.

[BANO database](#): a unique database currently capped at 550 Black and Asian network organisations across sectors and across the UK to address the major issue of charities' lack of access to and knowledge of more diverse networks, where the board's networks and contacts were very largely people like them. The database highlights the thousands of Black and Asian individuals out there with the largely untapped skills, experience and commitment to be effective and valuable trustees, and is available for charities to advertise their trustee vacancies.

An online network of aspiring or current Black and Asian trustees, to which charities might advertise their trustee vacancies. The network currently has over 600 members.

The Black and Asian Future Chairs Academy

(BAFCA): a network for aspiring Black and Asian chairs or co-chairs and current or former chairs of any ethnicity who are keen to mentor aspiring Black and Asian chairs or co-chairs. Through BAFCA, we are seeking to develop a pipeline of Black and Asian chairs or co-chairs, who would - we hope - present a more diverse, a more inclusive, and more representative face of charity leadership. Key elements of BAFCA are the chance to be mentored by an existing or former chair, membership of the Association of Chairs and an opportunity to shadow an existing chair.

Author bio

Malcolm is a trustee of the Association of Chairs. He is also founder of Action for Trustee Racial Diversity, an organisation focused on supporting charities to increase the diversity of their trustee boards. In November 2024, Action for Trustee Racial Diversity achieved charity status and will be renamed as Board Racial Diversity UK.

Your experiences:

“Those we support are some of the most disadvantaged, poor, barrier-facing global majority communities in London and our lack of understanding of that world means we can fail to connect effectively with their needs and therefore target the right outcomes.”

Survey respondent 2024

Neurodiversity and being your authentic self

By Neal Mankey, Chair, ADHD UK

I'm a true believer that diversity of thought within any organisation at board and executive level is key in order to have a true understanding of the barriers that are faced for those with protected characteristics. This is especially crucial for organisations that serve the public, such as charities, as they can therefore have a real depth and breadth of understanding of the challenges that are faced by their trustees, volunteers, staff and communities alike.

As someone who was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) at the age of 41 in 2020, I can honestly say that my diagnosis has been life changing for all the right reasons as I'm now able to work with my ADHD as opposed to against it, which I had been doing all my life. [Data from the Lancet and NICE](#) (National Institute of Health and Care Excellence) shows that an estimated 2.6 million people in the UK have ADHD (708,000 children and 1.9m adults), however approximately 80% are undiagnosed and therefore living with challenges such as anxiety, depression, executive functioning, suicidal thoughts, emotional dysregulation, disruptive and impulsive behaviours and difficulty with focus and concentration. These therefore massively impact

how they are presenting within the workplace, within their home life, and within their roles as volunteers, trustees, and chairs.

Given ADHD is still a relatively unknown condition, it's vital that charities have a true understanding of what a trustee or chair with ADHD needs in order to feel they can bring their authentic selves to the board and contribute effectively. From my own research and indeed lived experience, in order to build support, neurodiverse colleagues need:

- » **Culture** – built on psychological safety and belonging.
- » **Inclusion** – EDI policies to level the playing field, building champions and allies.
- » **Empowerment** – having a strengths-based approach and needs-based adjustments.
- » **Community** – creating a network, sharing stories and experiences.
- » **Leadership** – developing and supporting compassionate leaders.

These are all evidently good for everyone, but essential for those with a neurodiversity such as ADHD or Autism. Good practice starts at the top – getting it right for the board leadership sends a message to everyone involved with the organisation that this is a place where inclusion is a priority. However, this isn't always easy to implement if your board are used to doing things a certain way and not open to change. Ensuring that your leadership team buys into these key elements by understanding how much positivity comes from having this approach is key. This is easy to do by upskilling and having training on neurodiversity, webinars where subject matter experts can present and bring this to life, and seeing firsthand how these elements positively impact your ability to attract and retain board members, staff, and volunteers.

Neurodiversity and being your authentic self

As someone who recruits chairs, trustees, non-executive directors and executives, ensuring there is a level playing field throughout the recruitment process is vital to ensure that the campaign attracts a truly diverse field. Diversifying the way you advertise, receive applications and assess applicants so opportunities are accessible to everyone is a positive step.

Tips for board recruitment:

- » Ensure all adverts are worded accordingly to show you're an organisation that wants to attract a range of diverse characteristics, and why.
- » Ensure the interview process is open to reasonable adjustments such as interview questions and presentations well in advance of the interview.
- » Use closed questions that focus on candidates' actual experiences and skills rather than open-ended hypothetical questions.
- » Don't judge candidates by their inability to remember key dates on their CV, spelling or grammatical mistakes.
- » Ensure that candidates are aware beforehand what to expect on the day and exactly who they will be meeting.

These are quite simple adjustments any organisation can accommodate.

The hiring process is simply the beginning, and we need to ensure that the onboarding and support is there to enable any new board member to be their authentic selves, that the board and senior staff are aware of the challenges that come with having ADHD, and that the right support and understanding is there when needed.

There are so many benefits that come with building diversity of thought within any organisation. Having neurodiversity represented will ensure that there is always creativity and the ability to 'think outside the box' and bring a different perspective, and ensuring individuals have a safe space to feel like they truly belong is key to unlocking their true potential.

Recommended resources:

[ADHD interview adjustments](#), ADHD UK

[About ADHD](#)

Author bio

Through his own lived experience and adult diagnosis, Neal is passionate about ADHD and is Chair of the mental health charity ADHD UK, a charity that provides information, support, research, awareness and advocacy for those impacted by ADHD. He works for Veredus, who focus on senior level hires in the public, private, and civic sectors.

[Neal's LinkedIn](#)

[ADHD UK](#)

Diversity, visibility, and good intentions

By Yatin Mistry, Chair, LGBT+ Consortium

Why does diversity matter for boards?

We can have multiple voices, multiple views, and the more views that we have, the richer is our offering back to the charity. If we have different lived experiences, that might give us an insight into something that we might not have thought about.

If we're a very homogeneous board - all white or all brown or all women or all gay men - we won't have the experience of other perspectives. The danger with having something that's too homogeneous is we can become an echo chamber.

The ultimate aim is to enrich the board and the whole charity, because then the charity is going to have multiple views and perspectives that can be thought about when decisions have to be made by the board.

Barriers to inclusion

One barrier is, if you're a queer person, you're (and this is a generalisation here) potentially dealing with elements of your own kind of trauma. As a queer person, you live in a heteronormative world. As a trans person, you live in a cisgendered world. As a person of colour, you may live in a white majority country (in the UK for example). This can make some people feel like "an other" and always on the outside. To be a chair or to be a trustee, you need to have time and headspace to be able to do the role. As a board, as a chair, you need understanding and compassion for people who have been through traumatic experiences and have to deal with that alongside their volunteer duties. Perhaps a regular check-in can help, especially when a new trustee starts off, to ensure they feel their voice is being heard, and they feel part of the team.

Visibility matters

When you see photos of boards that have people of colour included, it would make someone like me think "there is someone of colour, someone like me, there." It's a bit more challenging in photos to demonstrate queer representation, but visibility also means things like adding pronouns in all documentation, because that would make any queer person think that the organisation is thinking about inclusivity. Making sure your charity is visible and present at LGBT pride events and spaces, or supporting these things on social media, would also be helpful in visibility.

Diversity, visibility, and good intentions

Think about how you say it, and where you say it

We need to dissolve this idea of being a chair or a trustee as a lofty thing. Maybe there is that perception that it's for older people, or for older men to do. Visibility and presence can help to break that perception down. For example, advertising or being featured in certain publications like Attitude magazine or Pink News, which targets the LGBT+ community, or Asian Voice, which targets the Asian community. Targeting certain communities with advertorials or articles from time to time raises the profile of your charity, and can help to show when advertising trustee and chair roles that it would be a welcoming board. Social media is another great platform - I came across my current chair role on a social media post. I wasn't even looking for a chair role!

Should you put the phrase "we welcome applications from everyone" in a chair or trustee advert? I think it really helps, but you need to be targeted as well, not just saying "everybody", but more specifically, "queer people, people of colour, women, disabled people, neurodiverse people." It's more powerful, because if you see the word "everybody" you may skim over it, but when you hear the specifics, you pay more attention.

As a brown man growing up in the 80s, when a brown person was on TV, I would take special interest because it was so rare. That's because I identify as a brown man. So seeing things I identify with would catch my attention more deeply. In a similar way when you're producing literature and you write down specific communities you're targeting, such as person of colour, queer person, neurodivergent person, those people will pay more attention.

Not feeling confident or sure where to start?

A good first step is to have training, read some resources, or watch a video. As a chair, you could organise for your board to come together and watch a video, or read something, then have a conversation about it.

And don't be worried about making mistakes or offending people! If you make a mistake, a genuine error, not malicious, most trans people won't mind. Most gay people won't mind. People are very forgiving - unless the intention is malicious. The media actually creates a lot of fear of slipping up or misgendering. Generally, it doesn't work that way. You might have the odd case, but most people are very forgiving.

So have good intentions, make an effort, and keep learning!

Top tips:

- » Use pronouns in your literature.
- » Use inclusive imagery.
- » Be present and visible in relevant events, social media channels, publications, and campaigns that are relevant to the communities you want to engage.
- » Advertise your trustee and chair roles widely, and target specific communities.
- » Be specific in your wording of trustee and chair vacancies about which communities you're trying to reach out to.
- » As a board, come together to learn, watch videos, use resources, ask questions, and don't be afraid to make mistakes!

Diversity, visibility, and good intentions

Recommended resources:

- » Charity So Straight [#QueerTrustees campaign](#)
- » [What can you do to make your charity a safer place for LGBTQIA+ people?](#) - Zoe Amar Digital

Author bio

Yatin Mistry serves as the Chair of the LGBT+ Consortium, a national LGBT+ membership charity that supports over 600 diverse organisations across the UK, with an annual turnover of approximately £1.5 million. In addition to his work with the Consortium, Yatin is a dedicated mindset coach and NLP practitioner, with a focus on empowering leaders to overcome self-limiting beliefs. Drawing on over 15 years of experience as a consultant and entrepreneur, Yatin leverages his extensive corporate expertise to guide individuals, particularly within the LGBT+ community and among people of colour, in navigating cultural challenges and overcoming negative thinking patterns. His approach emphasises empathic self-communication and the use of reframing techniques to foster personal and professional growth.

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Navigating EDI in board governance: challenges and opportunities

By Rashmi Rungta, AoC trustee and experienced board member

EDI presents complex challenges for board governance. The term encompasses a wide range from ethnic diversity to hidden disabilities and gender discrimination. Treating EDI as a mere checkbox exercise is easy, but genuinely implementing it is a much more formidable task.

As a woman of Indian origin with a hidden disability who has served on various charitable boards, including a university, for over seven years, I am passionate about equity and inclusion. Having personally experienced a multitude of challenges and lack of support, I am deeply committed to ensuring equal opportunities and support for the underrepresented.

The EDI disconnect

My experience shows that EDI is neither well understood nor its benefits fully appreciated. Some believe extra efforts to promote and support diversity are unnecessary, forgetting that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. On some boards, I have felt welcomed and appreciated; on others, I have been undermined, ignored, and ostracised for raising difficult topics. Nevertheless, as a responsible board member, I prioritise ethics and responsibilities, and these experiences have made me more resilient and persevering.

Importance of equal opportunities and transparency

Understanding diversity, providing equal opportunities, being supportive, and maintaining transparency are crucial. While multiple schemes exist, their effectiveness is often clouded by a lack of transparency and constructive feedback, negatively impacting capable individuals who miss out on seeking the right support and prospects.

Living with a hidden disability and growing up in a patriarchal society in India has made me determined to be independent. I leverage my global experience and skills to empower the underrepresented, demonstrated through my volunteer activities.

Navigating EDI in board governance: challenges and opportunities

Embracing diversity in a dynamic world

In today's global, dynamic environment, exacerbated by COVID-19 and ongoing conflicts, we must be prepared for unpredictability. Diversity is essential as it brings a wide range of different perspectives and lived experiences to the organisation. This diversity of thinking, and ensuring that all voices are included and respected, can strengthen a board and their ability to plan for, and react to, a rapidly changing, unpredictable modern world. It's like a cord woven of many strands – one thread on its own is weaker, many threads together are much stronger.

An awareness of power dynamics and inequalities enables a board to make the best collective decisions to achieve their charitable objects and help the people and communities they seek to serve. Charities and non-profits can sometimes unwittingly perpetuate the problems they are seeking to alleviate by further embedding inequalities and uneven power dynamics. A diverse board with an awareness of these issues will be better placed to tackle, and better yet, avoid, doing this.

Board chairs play a critical role in promoting equal opportunities, supporting diversity, and leading by example. They must think creatively, implement the right processes to encourage diversity, and foster effective collaboration among board members. This includes considering all viewpoints and providing adequate support, training, peer support and regular appraisals, including constructive feedback for the chair.

Conclusion

In summary, while there is substantial support available, it will only be beneficial if genuinely equal opportunities are provided for all. Trust, respect and understanding, regardless of differences, are essential. We must be mindful of everyone's unique challenges and work to empower and nurture each other.

Top tips:

- » EDI should not just be a tick box or temporary exercise but a genuine effort promoted by the chair.
- » Embrace and celebrate the diversity on your board - understand what it actually means for the board members both non-representative and representative of diversity.
- » Don't be judgemental or biased as everyone is bringing their strengths to the table; look to having those diverse skills on board, especially lived experience.
- » Trust, respect and empower your individual board members.
- » Customise the support for the board members based on their individual needs.

Author bio

Rashmi brings over 25 years of international experience to the table, including 7 years of board experience across diverse not-for-profit organisations, including a UK university. Her career journey has traversed both technology and business domains in the private sector. She has served on several committees, such as Audit and Risk, Governance and Resources, Marketing, and EDI, as a Non-Executive Director (NED) in various not-for-profit entities.

The challenges

In our EDI survey for chairs, trustees, and senior leaders (September 2024), there was generally much enthusiasm for taking action to address EDI at board level. However, many of those who responded to the survey were also honest about the challenges they faced. Perhaps you recognise these in your own board or organisation? (In the following chapter we explore lots of practical steps and actions you can take which we hope will help you to address some of these challenges.)

In this section, we share some of the survey responses reflecting on those challenges.

Attitudes

Some chairs and trustees highlighted that they face challenges to exploring EDI in the form of negative attitudes from other trustees, from the staff, or from the general public. For other boards, it isn't a lack of willingness, rather, it's the presence of fear and uncertainty which prevents action.

Your experiences:

“Whilst the board is wanting to work on developing our EDI policy and wish to involve all staff, volunteers and service users, we are meeting some resistance from staff.”

“People saying nothing for fear of getting it ‘wrong’. People wrongly continuing to believe increasing diversity = decreasing quality which couldn't be further from the reality.”

“Fears about external criticism for being ‘woke’.”

“I believe some trustees find the pace of change unsettling – e.g. the language is constantly evolving – which they may find threatening. This may lead them to withdraw or reduce their engagement, a situation that needs to be avoided.”

The challenges

Capacity

Respondents also flagged that simply finding the time among very packed board agendas and pressing priorities was a real challenge. This is not a surprise when so many charities and non-profits are overstretched with funding shortfalls and demand for services rising. In small charities it is not unusual for trustee and chair time to be taken up by operational firefighting, leaving less time for the thought, exploration, and training that EDI may require.

Your experiences:

“Time commitment is an obstacle – strategy and financial pressures take up much of the available oxygen.”

“The first challenge is to get EDI as a specific topic on a busy board agenda, and then to engage in meaningful conversations with measurable outcomes.”

Finances

There were some objections raised by survey respondents to the costs of EDI, particularly when it comes to trustee recruitment – advertising and using agency searches to help find more diverse candidates can be expensive and some survey respondents indicated they had tried this and it wasn't always successful. It was mentioned by some respondents that having a charity that was facing financial instability meant EDI was not a focus.

Your experiences:

“Specialised recruitment can cost money (which we don't spend when recruiting staff, either, and so doing so on board advertisements isn't a great balance).”

“Cost of job boards that target protected characteristics are often expensive and this can be a blocker when budgets are tight.”

“Small organisation with a huge remit with huge challenge on staying viable tends to be very time consuming and squeezes out many of the things we would like to do. The board is engaged, very open and honest about the issues and more progress could be made if we were more stable financially.”

The challenges

Other practical issues

Some survey respondents identified issues with their policies, their constitution, the unpaid and demanding nature of the role of chair/ trustee, or limitations in their local area demographics, which they felt were hindering progress on EDI.

Your experiences:

“A potential barrier could be not having fixed terms for trustees, limiting the ability to recruit on a regular basis.”

“Our constitution limits the pool of potential board members.”

“Half our trustees are elected so it can be luck of the draw.”

“All our board members are elected from within our membership. Our membership is not diverse so that limits options for a diverse board.”

“For us, discussion around EDI in places like Wales additionally needs to factor in language (Welsh language) and geography. Predominantly rural areas like Wales also face challenges from the geography of populations that can make it challenging to form a rounded board.”

“The requirements of the board and especially chairs are increasingly unrealistic and the governance requirements run counter to diversity as so much experience is needed to meet the requirements of the role which you are unlikely to have without having done similar roles before. We need to make the requirements/expectations more realistic for the role to be more inclusive.”

“I do wonder if the inability to pay trustees could be a barrier to younger or lower paid people, who cannot afford to give their time for free, but may be very useful on the board, bringing their insights.”

“Social class inequality is a huge issue in Britain today – and on trustee boards. I don’t understand why the charity sector is so reluctant to at least have a discussion about different models of charity governance, including paying chairs. Being a chair is a demanding and highly responsible role.”

Where to start

We hope the author contributions have given you some food for thought. But where do you go from here? What if the challenges in the previous section are ones you are struggling with too?

We recognise that it can feel difficult to pinpoint where to begin, so we have provided below some questions and action points for you and your board to consider, and some starting points to look into. We have included lots of tried and tested tips from our own members, chairs, trustees, and sector leaders, who generously shared them in our 2024 survey.

Conversation starters and action points

- » We suggest you read the [Charity Governance Code Principle Six](#) on EDI which contains recommendations for both smaller and larger charities, if you haven't already!

Diversity audit

- » Conduct a diversity audit to help you understand if there are voices or perspectives that may be missing, including those of people with lived experience of the communities you serve. (Not all diversities are obvious or visible.)
- » Identify any areas that you particularly want to focus on.
- » Reach Volunteering's resources on this may be helpful: <https://reachvolunteering.org.uk/trustee-recruitment-cycle/reflect/how-carry-out-diversity-audit>

Roles

Consider whether creating a co-chair role would work for you, now or for your future succession planning. Co-chairing can help to share the load and make the chairing role more accessible – opening up a wider range of diverse candidates.

Things to consider:

- » How will the tasks of chairing be divided?
- » Will you advertise specifically for co-chairs, or advertise the chairing role and make clear that you are open to co-chairing applications?
- » Will you seek applicants who want to apply together, or match them?
- » Will you conduct joint interviews?

Where to start

Reward and remuneration

Review your expenses and remuneration policies for board members, as financial barriers can prevent people from applying to be on a board, and this can be a crucial barrier to a greater diversity of applicants.

- » Have you considered the cost of attending meetings and how that might prohibit some people from being involved?
- » Does your expenses policy allow for paying expenses or travel costs in advance?
- » Are there any rewards or recognitions in place, such as vouchers?
- » If trustees need technology to access online meetings is there a way of providing this for those who can't afford it?
- » Amend your application pack to clearly highlight the support provided so that people aren't put off by financial challenges.

Trustee recruitment

Wording:

- » Review the wording in your trustee recruitment packs and adverts. Is it written in straightforward language with no jargon and acronyms explained?
- » Is it overtly and specifically inclusive and welcoming? See Yatin Mistry's chapter in this guide where he talks about the importance of specificity in recruitment wording.

Your experiences:

“Generally we have reduced the list of skills required when advertising to make it much more open/accessible, and we use plain straightforward English rather than jargon. We anonymise all applicants so that we shortlist without seeing names/ages/gender.”

“Inclusive recruitment – encouraging applications by stressing that no board experience is required and support/training plus a mentor appointed when they join. This made a considerable difference across all EDI areas including disability, ethnicity and age.”

Where to start

Advertising:

Where do you advertise trustee vacancies? Consider how you might reach a wider audience. Some things to consider:

- » Use your social media channels. Why not tag collaborative or aligned organisations or relevant local groups, services, or businesses in your posts so they can share them and amplify your reach? Facebook forums for local community groups and interest groups might be a good place to explore.
- » Connect with local community groups, CVS, faith organisations, and social groups who work with a range of communities. Your local coffee shops may have community notice boards you could pin an advert to.
- » Are there targeted publications or social media channels, either local or national, you could use that focus on particular communities of people that you hope to reach?
- » Personal recruitment approaches – can you nurture potential applicants through personal contact, particularly amongst your service users, volunteers, and networks? A number of our survey respondents highlighted that the personal approach to contacts and local communities worked well for them as it made connections and encouraged people to apply who might not have considered it.
- » Some of our survey respondents had tried using search agencies, with varying degrees of success.
- » Don't forget your own newsletters, donors, volunteers, and service users. They might be interested in helping or be able to spread the word for you!
- » Some of the organisations mentioned in this guide offer help to advertise trustee vacancies.

Your experiences:

“Creating an ongoing list of potential candidates that all board members may edit. This has resulted in a list of qualified candidates to contact.”

“Part of achieving this was contacting people who fitted our criteria and proactively working with them to get them to apply. This worked both for missing skills and also missing diversity.”

“We reached directly into the Asian Muslim community via a local mosque.”

“Talk to community leaders – not just the obvious ones like imams or church pastors, but people known and trusted as local citizens. Don't treat all ethnic groups the same – there is diversity even within the Chinese and South Asian communities – different histories, languages, cultures and expectations. Talk to other places who have made progress – don't be afraid to ask for help to get started.”

Where to start

Applying:

- » Review your application pack to make sure it's welcoming, friendly, uses inclusive language, avoids jargon, and clearly explains the role of trustee/chair. Could you include a letter from the current chair, or a video from a trustee or service user to make the content more personal and engaging?
- » Do you provide a variety of formats for people to apply for a trustee role e.g. online form, printed application, send a CV by email, send a video?
- » Does the application process give people a chance to express how their lived experience might be relevant to the role?
- » Do you offer support to fill in the application form if someone needs help?
- » Can they contact someone for an informal chat about the role to find out more?

Interviewing:

Review your trustee interview process. Sometimes even little changes can make a big difference and don't require much or any additional expense or time.

- » Do candidates get questions in advance?
- » Do applicants have a choice between online or in-person interviews? If they are taking place in person is the building and the room accessible?
- » How do you make it clear to applicants that adjustments and flexibility are welcomed? Rather than relying on candidates asking for adjustments, you could proactively ask everyone offered an interview if there is anything they need to make the process more accessible for them.

Trustee inductions, training and ongoing support

- » Are potential trustees allowed to shadow existing trustees or observe a board meeting?
- » For new trustees is there a lot of paperwork and form filling and if so, can these be supplied in other formats or can you offer support to fill them in?
- » Do you have a buddy system to help new trustees feel supported as they settle in?
- » What other ways can trustees connect together, build relationships, and feel part of a team?
- » How do you identify ongoing training and development needs for trustees?
- » Do you conduct regular and annual reviews with trustees to see how they are getting on and if they need any support or training?
- » Do they lack confidence in certain areas, such as finances, and need some additional time, resources, or development to help them participate more effectively?

Your experiences:

“Board shadowing - great success!”

“We have a WhatsApp group for between board meetings communications. This has been really good at keeping in touch and building rapport and showing support. This was particularly obvious during the recent racist and Islamophobic riots. We have anonymous feedback surveys post-board meetings.”

Where to start

Board meetings

- » How can board members request adjustments?
Some people may be embarrassed or uncomfortable highlighting any additional needs – asking everyone proactively can make people feel more at ease in expressing if there is anything that might make board meetings more accessible or inclusive for them.
- » Do you provide board papers in any other formats?
- » Are board papers sent out in advance for people to have time to read through?
- » Are the papers in straightforward, understandable language without jargon or unexplained acronyms?
- » Can trustees talk through the papers before the meeting with someone in case they have any questions or don't feel they understand something?
- » Consider the format, location, and timing of your board meetings. Are these inclusive for different requirements and access needs? Might the timing of meetings put some people off applying in the first place – for example, are they always during the daytime when people might be working? If they are always held in person this may be difficult for some people, such as those with caring responsibilities, those who live further away or can't afford to travel – could you try a mix of online and in-person meetings or varying the timings?
- » Some trustees may not speak up much in meetings but it doesn't mean they don't have something important to say. How do you encourage people to contribute during the meeting if they haven't said much? Do you do one-to-one trustee reviews and regular individual check-ins between meetings to make sure trustees feel comfortable and confident to have their say and identify any problems?

Your experiences:

“I am discussing with trustee colleagues moving meetings to late afternoon/early evening, rather than on a weekday morning to be more inclusive – this is also crucial because day-time meetings exclude people who simply cannot afford to take time off work.”

“One trustee has little money or internet access, so hard copies of board papers are mailed to him.”

“One of my new trustees is neurodiverse and much prefers text to lots of emails.”

Where to start

EDI as an ongoing focus

- » Are you relying on one person or trustee to raise or lead on EDI for your board?
- » Could you create a sub-committee or EDI working group to take a more collective approach?
- » Which areas of EDI do you feel you and your board lack confidence or progress on, and are there training or resources you could access or share as a board to look into this and learn together?
- » Could you invite a guest speaker who has expertise in EDI overall or a specific area to come and give a presentation or deliver a workshop?

Your experiences:

“Since 2020, we’ve had a working group which is responsible for oversight on EDI issues across the organisation. The group has helped with the co-opted member recruitment, our adoption of Disability Confident Committed status, improving our monitoring and data collection practice, and a range of other practical measures. The group members also help champion EDI issues at board and committee level.”

“We have a board lead for EDI and the board reviews progress on EDI issues every 6 months.”

“We have an annual EDI self-assessment looking at policies. We have used the Governance App to assess the board as EDI is one of the principles. We are using the learning to address our marketing, website and promotional materials as well as embed EDI into staff development and our strategic objectives.”

Where to start

Stay positive and don't give up

We know the challenges that charities and non-profits face on a daily basis, and many of you will be consumed with funding worries and firefighting. We wanted to share some encouragement with you if you're facing barriers to exploring EDI, and felt there was no better encouragement than from your fellow chairs and trustees who filled in our EDI survey:

Your experiences:

“Don't try to change the world all at once – each small step can make a difference.”

“Don't be discouraged! Consistency is key.”

“Keep going at it and recognise that it is a matter of small shifts and continuous work, but a few quick wins along the way can really help.”

“We are unafraid of trying something that may not 'succeed'. We accept we may not achieve all aims and reflect on why an aim isn't achieved and what can be done about that.”

“Use recognised benchmarks and assess yourself honestly. Focus on a few small things each year and aim for steady progress rather than a flash in the pan approach.”

“I am being very patient. I won't give up. Together we will get there.”

We recognise there is much more to do than just these points above, but we hope these might give you some areas of focus to start with, if you're feeling like you don't know where to begin. We also hope you'll use some of the top tips and resources recommended throughout this guide by our various authors.

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