

Strategic plan for the Association of Chairs

For the financial years 2024/25 to 2026/27

Introduction

We have developed and published this plan for three reasons. Firstly, we needed to discuss and agree as a trustee and staff team what our priorities are, then set them out clearly. By doing this we can ensure that we make the best possible use of our limited resources.

Secondly, we want our stakeholders – members, funders, the wider sector etc – to have a clear idea of our plans so we can work closely with them. It holds us accountable for the use of their funds and support and shows stakeholders how we will deliver for them.

Thirdly, a clear strategy is even more important for small charities than it is for big charities, given our need to deliver huge amounts on limited resources. A strategic approach is the only way that a small, indeed tiny, organisation like ours can deliver the greatest impact to our beneficiaries with our limited resources.

All that said, this is not a tablet of stone. It's a living, breathing document. We should be learning each year, then refining and developing our targets and goals. Sometimes we will have been too ambitious, and other occasions too cautious. Each year we plan to publish an update as we innovate and learn, mostly delivering and sometimes failing.

The external factors for our work

There are a number of factors that affect our future plans, for the next few years:

- The Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis means that the demands for charity services are greater than ever before. Consequently the pressures on trustees and especially chairs are huge in many organisations.
- At the same time, the ability to generate funds is getting harder. It is more expensive to fundraise. There is more demand for the funds of grant-makers. The level of government funds is only decreasing. Both of these first two factors have put more pressure on boards, particularly chairs.
- If these first two factors are negative, this last one is positive. There is a huge will for AoC to succeed, to continue doing great work. This means the reservoir of support we have from chairs themselves and other sector bodies is real and available. We need to work out how to use this reservoir of support, especially from current or former chairs.

The internal factors for our work

2023 saw considerable change for the Association of Chairs. Our two most senior members of staff left, including our founder CEO Ros Oakley. Much organisational knowledge was lost. In addition a number of trustees came to the end of their terms, including our Chair, adding to our loss of history, practice and continuity. We have reduced this risk to some extent by creating a thorough induction programme for both staff and trustees.

However in reality, the only effective way to turn these challenges into opportunities is for us to re-examine all our activity, understanding why we do what we do. This will allow us to make the very best use of our limited funds. The good news is that this process of review and rebuilding has begun. We have an interim CEO, a new Chair and four new trustees to help us maximise these opportunities, as well as a strong, diverse group of existing trustees.

Our vision, mission and values

Our vision

Our vision is of effective and valued chairs, with flourishing boards, leading resilient charities which make a positive impact in the world.

Our mission

Our mission is to champion charity chairs and their boards in all their diversity, empowering them with confidence, collaboration, and community.

The values to which we aspire:

- **To be influential** – we are a voice for chairs, championing the chairing role and the value of effective board leadership, with leaders, organisations, forums, policy makers and opinion shapers in the third sector and beyond.
- **To be collaborative** – we work with other organisations to bring added value and to learn from their experience and expertise.
- **To be expert** – we understand the chairing role and its challenges. We also understand the current landscape for charities, small and large. We bring this expertise and experience to everything we do.
- **To be inclusive** – we are for all chairs, vice chairs and co-chairs and board leaders, in all their diversity. We recognise the utmost importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion, both for our organisation and for truly effective boards.
- **To be dynamic** – we seize new opportunities, are willing to innovate and embrace fresh approaches. We respond to current and potential trends that affect our members.

Timescales and updates

The overall timespan for this plan is for the three financial years starting in April 2024, finishing in March 2027. So the five headline priorities should be our guiding lights for the duration of that period. The detail of our activities and our measures of success will be renewed each year. This is to make sure that we have updated our goals, based on our successes or failures in the previous year. And we recognise that some of these priorities will last well beyond the period of this plan.

Priority 1: Increase the breadth and depth of engagement with members.

What is the issue, why does this matter and where are we now?

Engagement with our individual members is poor. 47% have never been to an event in the last year. Just 27% of our survey respondents in autumn 2023 say they read the newsletter 'very frequently'. While membership levels are stable, renewal rates are below membership sector norms at around 50% instead of the benchmark of 80%.

This lack of engagement means that we are filling a leaky bucket – as quick as we recruit new members, older ones leave. We are running to stand still. It matters for our finances, but also matters because chairs aren't getting the breadth of support we know they need.

Our base is currently really just chairs. Few vice chairs are members, and we have only marketed ourselves to chairs in England and Wales. We must become a more inclusive and diverse organisation, welcoming chairs from all nations, and wherever they are in the board leadership journey. Part of the change (linked to organisational membership outlined below) is to focus on chairs, plus other leaders in their boards. We believe by having better boards, we will make chairs even more effective. Our survey shows considerable support for this (55% of respondents agreed it would be good if AoC had membership for the whole board). At the same time we would continue to have events and programmes exclusively for chairs.

Part of the problem is that chairs step down from their term, or just get used to the challenges of the job. The survey suggests that there is an appetite for a product that engages more of the board so that, for example, chairs can delegate engagement with us to others, allowing them time to develop their successor and the whole board.

How will we get there?

1. Develop AoC's support to be more than transactional, so that members feel loyalty to, and inclusion in, part of a community committed to growing the quality of charity governance.

2. Build our social media presence in general but particularly by setting up a Facebook or LinkedIn page to generate more dialogue with members. There will also be a WhatsApp group for members and, in due course, a forum in which members can debate with and support each other.

3. Revamp the newsletter and create greater distinction between member and non-member communications. This will include more original blogs, curated resources and content on chairing and board leadership.

4. Develop the idea that AoC is for current and potential leaders of boards, so that as we develop the quality of the whole board, we improve the quality of its leadership and its chair. We believe this will help improve both succession planning and trustee recruitment.

5. Develop our mentoring and peer support programme. We have already started to provide mentoring and peer support for London chairs with funding from City Bridge Foundation. We now want to explore the possibility of expanding this into other parts of England and the UK. We believe there is considerable potential to grow this community of chairs and board leaders into issue-based or geographical peer groups. We aim to develop this work through all three years of the strategy.

6. We know from our 2023 survey that some kind of helpline/crisis support is wanted by chairs. We have already offered support through one-to-one sessions with those who ask us (our president Ruth Lesirge has been key in this area), but we have done nothing proactive or systematic. We believe that we could offer some kind of more structured support using experienced chairs, providing one-off sessions or short-term intensive ‘crisis’ support or action learning in small groups with shared challenges.

What are the measures of success for 2024/25 and beyond?

1. 250 members on the WhatsApp or discussion forum by the end of 2024/25 ie March 2025.
2. Start a Facebook or LinkedIn page for AoC members and followers.
3. Revamp the newsletter to go out twice a month and commission/publish 25 blogs/interviews/thought pieces a year.
4. Increase member renewal rates to 60% by the end of 2024/25 (March 25), 70% by March 26 and 80% by March 27.
5. Increase the number of members going to an event in a year to 60% by March 25.
6. Increase the number of members who say they read the newsletter ‘very frequently’ to 40% by March 25.
7. Have 2000 individual members by March 2026.
8. Develop continuous membership payment mechanisms to reduce attrition with the new CRM.
9. 300 individuals taking part in a mentoring activity annually by March 26, 25 peer support events held, and ten peer groups established by the end of the period of this plan (March 27).
10. Pilot helpline or crisis support by the end of 2024/25 ie March 25. This will be multi-layered (eg one to one support, group support, email support) and use a cadre of experienced chairs or consultants.

Priority 2: Build a more sustainable income base.

What is the issue, why does this matter and where are we now?

Under 30% of our income comes from our members. This means we are highly dependent on several very supportive grant-makers. Growing that funder income is both very difficult and very time consuming (whether it is or isn't successful). So to be sustainable, let alone grow, we need to earn more of our income through membership or events or consultancy or other routes.

In 2023-24 we had three unrestricted funders and one restricted funder who provided £104k, about 46% of our income. Our grant-funders have been amazingly supportive over a number of years. But we can't take them for granted, and more importantly, we can't grow our income without finding new corporate supporters or grant-funders.

It is for these reasons that we need to increase our earned income from membership, events and consultancy.

How will we get there?

1. Create an organisational membership so that chairs and their boards can join. This will allow all the board members to join AoC. Those who are interested in chairing or board leadership will be able to attend webinars, events, training as well as receiving our newsletter. We will need a new CRM system to be in place before we can launch an organisational membership.

2. Create a membership opportunity for corporate/organisational supporters. We know there are investment managers, accountants, law firms, grant-makers, and the like who support what we are trying to do. We will develop a corporate membership for them which allows them to financially support our work (either through discounts or actual money). The benefit to corporate members will be access to our members through running webinars or other events, or writing blogs, or other content for our website.

3. Develop our work with federated and syndicated membership organisations. We are already supporting a number of national federated/syndicated organisations, helping their chairs develop their skills and knowledge. We believe there is considerable potential for developing this, by marketing these services and also through development of our ability to tailor the services for specific partners.

What are the measures of success for 2024/25 and beyond?

1. We will have 50 organisational members by the end of 2024/25, 150 by the end of 2025/26, and 250 by the end of 2026/2027. This will bring an additional average of £250 per member, and a total of £125,000 by March 27.
2. We will have six corporate supporters by the end of 2024/25, and another ten each year till the end of 2026. They will bring in an average of £2000 and a total of £52,000 by March 27.

3. We will have six federated (or branch) membership partners by the end of 2024/25, 12 by the end of 2025 and 20 by the end of 2026 bringing an average of £5,000 each year and a total of £100,000 by March 27.
4. By the end of 2024/25 we aim to be earning 45% of our income, and then a further 10% each year till we reach 70% by 2027/28.

Priority 3: Diversify our ways of supporting and engaging chairs, boards and members.

What is the issue, why does this matter and where are we now?

All the evidence from our finances, our membership records and our engagement with members suggests that we aren't reaching enough chairs, and that at the current subscription levels, we can't be sustainable (£60 a year for organisations under £5 million, £120 for those over). We need to have more members of all types and size of organisation, by geography, and by their stage in the individual chairing journey.

In addition, we know from our survey that our chairs are not representative of the different elements of our society. Currently chairs are significantly older, more educated, more likely to be white and less likely to be disabled. Creating real diversity in chairs, and our membership, which represents wider society is a top priority.

We can't expect the type of chairs that are appointed to just become more diverse, if the boards from which they come aren't already diverse. So we need to work to diversify those who become trustees, who are thinking about becoming committee or working group chairs, and who are then prepared to become chairs.

How will we get there?

1. Encourage membership from Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. At present we only encourage chairs from England and Wales. We think it makes sense to approach chairs from the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to join us. The differences that this greater geographical and regulatory expansion will make to the content of our programmes is minimal. We might need to register with other regulators in due course, but the benefits of both more members and greater diversity within our membership is worth it.

2. Encourage membership from aspiring chairs and board leaders irrespective of current status. Our membership has so far tended to focus almost exclusively on existing chairs. This has a double downside. We have turned away people who might become chairs, or whose skills and experience contribute to a better-run board. We have also given the impression that once people have stopped being a chair, they should step down from membership. This gives a transactional impression of our membership – people join when they need us. We want people to join because they believe in what we are trying to do, and

because they want to be part of a community that supports, embraces and nurtures them, their peers and the work that they undertake.

3. Encourage a multitude of ways of running a strong board. The more the impression is created that there is a right way to run a board of trustees – an orthodoxy of approach – the more the danger is that we put off certain kinds of people (and perhaps encourage others). We want to make sure that we welcome and encourage innovation and diversity in how our boards are run. This will produce a more vibrant chairing community and give the opportunity for boards to try out different ideas. Diversity of approach and diversity of trustees and chairs are positively complementary.

4. Work with others to support a more inclusive board ecosystem. Work with partners (such as Getting on Board, NCVO, ACEVO, Action on Trustee Racial Diversity, Honorary Treasurers Forum and Young Trustees Movement) who share our goal of strengthening boards by enabling greater diversity and inclusion among chairs and trustees, and addressing issues that deter underrepresented groups from becoming chairs and board leaders.

What are the measures of success?

1. Encourage membership from Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We intend that 8% of our membership will come from outside of England and Wales by the end of 2024/25 (it is currently 4% for Scotland and Northern Ireland).
2. Encourage membership from aspiring chairs and board leaders irrespective of current status. 14% of our 2023 survey respondents were trustees. We want 20% of our members to be non-chairs by Q2 2025/26.
3. Encourage a multitude of ways of running an effective board. This goal involves a journey, not a single binary change of approach. As we progress, our events and blogs will highlight a diversity of approaches to chairing and running boards.
4. Work with others on targeted work designed to stimulate greater equity, diversity and inclusion among chairs and boards, generating a range of resources that support this.

Priority 4: Clarify and strengthen our infrastructure.

What is the issue, why does it matter and where are we now?

We have ambitious plans. We have to, given the level of need that charities face, and the importance of chairs and their boards in tackling those needs. We can only succeed if we have a robust foundation or infrastructure underpinning everything we do. Our infrastructure involves:

- our database of members and supporters
- our website as a showcase for our work

- our visual and verbal brand as the way we express ourselves
- the key messages we use in everything we do
- the design and provision of our various programmes, such as events
- the other platforms and functions such as finance or IT that secure our existence

How will we get there?

1. Create a new CRM/database of members. Our current database/CRM system is a plug-in to WordPress. It has been supported voluntarily and generously for the last ten years. We now need to find either find new IT support or a new system. The consensus is to find a new CRM system, selected to match our database and member needs.

2. Create a new website linked to our new CRM. With the change in database, we will need to consider what will meet our current and future needs most effectively. Our belief is that we need a website that is more flexible, more visually appealing and something which allows us to manage the IT element for ourselves. For this reason we will consider a new website, once we have decided on a new database.

3. Refresh our key messages and strapline. We must be clear what our key messages are, and what single line sums up our approach for chairs and their key trustees (ie board or trustee leadership). These will crucially inform our brand. We believe sharpening this will help us reach chairs and their trustee peers more effectively.

3. Refresh our brand. The visual brand (logo, typeface, colours, strapline etc) of AoC, particularly the colours, do not stand out in a crowded marketplace. With the creation of a new website informed by key messages, it makes sense to launch a new visual brand at the same time for consistency and to help us reach more chairs and their colleagues on the board.

What are the measures of success?

1. Our aim is to have a new database by Q4 of 2024/25.
2. Our aim is to have a new website by early 2025. We would like it earlier, but we are aware of the amount of work required to produce a new database, and creating a new website at the same time makes this ambition unrealistic.
3. Our verbal brand and key messages will be developed in stages, tried and tested with our key audiences. The strapline will be introduced at the same time as the visual brand at the end of 2024/5.
4. Our new visual brand will be launched at the same time as the new website in early 2025.

Priority 5: Champion, advocate for and develop strong board leadership skills, particularly by chairs.

What is the issue, why does it matter and where are we now?

Charity boards are still regarded as ‘glorious amateurs’. We need to replace this with ‘professional volunteers’. Charity CEOs, finance directors, fundraising directors, communications directors and more are increasingly professionalising through training, qualifications, quality standards and a culture of continuous professional development. While trustees who are legally responsible for everything that a charity does, usually lack such development opportunities. We need to make sure that the work involved in chairing, being a trustee and running boards is developed and professionalised in a way that does justice to their staff, their peers and the mission of the charity, even though they are volunteers.

How will we get there?

We won’t change the way that boards work, or are perceived, quickly. It’s a ten year or more challenge. But every change of this size starts with small steps.

What are the measures of success?

- By the end of 2024/25 we will have begun to publish our ideas on how we want chairing, trustee boards and governance to develop.

How will we work?

1. Harness the wisdom and experience of chairs, board leaders and trustees.

We are a tiny organisation. We can only succeed if we use our members (and others) as professional volunteers to run our mentoring and peer support programmes, and in a dozen other ways. We want to create an enthusiastic and committed community of chairs and board leaders working together to improve the quality of charity governance.

2. Be a powerhouse for inspiring and informing people to be trustees, chairs, and board leaders; the go-to place.

We must inspire people. We need to persuade ordinary citizens that being a trustee of a charity is an incredible way to support their community and wider society. To do this, we need to show positive, attractive examples of the difference that non-profit governance makes.

3. Be a vocal supporter of the importance of chairs and trustee boards.

Part of our role is to be an advocate for the importance of chairs and other board leaders, the value they create. We will do this through our blogs, our thought-pieces, our

collaboration with other organisations, our public statements, and our alliances on specific issues. We will use our voice wherever appropriate to speak up for chairs and trustees, whenever and wherever we can make a difference.

4. Always innovate, sometimes fail, always learn, always aim to do better.

We need to innovate continuously during the next three years. We need to try things out, knowing that not everything works. Where we innovate and succeed, we will celebrate and share. Where we innovate and fail, we will learn and aim to do better. We should never be afraid of trying, failing and learning – perfection is the enemy of action.

5. Signpost, collaborate, partner and embrace working with other (small) trustee organisations or movements or initiatives. We are a small organisation in an ecosystem of small organisations (Getting on Board, Action on Trustee Racial Diversity, Young Trustees Movement, Honorary Treasurers Forum and Network of Women Chairs to name but a few). We must work together to make the most impact on chairs, trustees and boards. If we do new things we must be clear that it is better to collaborate than duplicate, better to signpost than replicate and that critical friends are invaluable.

6. Encourage diversity of people, approaches, and thinking in all aspects of charity boards. We have mentioned diversity and inclusion repeatedly in this plan. We mention it again here because if we want the boards of charities and the chairs of charities to be the very best that they can be, they need to be made up of all the talents that our society has to offer. To do this, understanding of and work on diversity and inclusion must run through all we do, like the pink sugar thread in a stick of rock.

Conclusion

There is a lot to do. Our plan sets out a wide variety of changes to our work, our brand, our activities and our events. But underpinning it all is the same basic idea that our founders had when they started the Association of Chairs: chairs matters, boards matter and supporting them will make a difference to the charities they are leaders of. We believe this strategic plan will help guide us and channel our resources effectively to make sure we can make the biggest difference to our mission and our goals.

We'd love to hear any thoughts you may have, whether it's praise, support, criticism or brickbats. We can only get better by hearing people's feedback about what we are trying to do.

Please email any thoughts to:

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Joe Saxton, Chair
Liz Lowther, interim CEO
And the rest of the AoC trustees
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