



governancehub

Setting Up a Network for Chairs

The Governance Hub is a partnership of eight organisations that provide support to the voluntary and community sector: Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (acevo), the Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG), The British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac), Charity Trustee Networks (CTN), East Cornwall Council for Voluntary Services (ECCVS), the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NACVA), the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and Volunteering England. The accountable body for the Governance Hub is NCVO (charity number 225922).

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Setting Up a Network for Chairs

by Peter Dyer

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Introduction

What is a network for chairs?

A network for chairs is formed when a group of chairs join together to support each other in an organised way. Some networks have hundreds of members and meet twice a year with high profile speakers and a large membership. Others are small and involve chairs from a specific type of organisation exploring a particular issue. Some operate nationally, others locally. Some are 'virtual' networks, operating through e-mail. But all are based on one principle: chairs gaining support and learning from each other.

The chair is a member of the trustee board whose role is to chair meetings of the board. In many organisations the chair takes on additional duties beyond this role – these could include managing staff or acting as a spokesperson. It can be a complex task and, whatever the duties of different chairs, there are often expectations and demands on the chair that are different from other trustees. So how do chairs access the support they need to carry out their role? How do they prepare themselves to tackle difficult issues?

Formal training is one option. Another is reading around a subject or having a mentor. Another, the focus of this guide, is accessing mutual support via an organised network.

This guide provides an overview of how to set up a network for chairs. This guide was developed in conjunction with Charity Trustee Networks, the national organisation that exists to support trustees and to develop networks of trustees. Also, in compiling the guide, interviews took place with:

- Hampshire Chairs Forum
- North Wiltshire Chairs Network
- Greater Manchester infrastructure chairs network
- Greater London infrastructure chairs network
- Network of Women Chairs
- A former national chairs network for large charities.

This guide concentrates on setting up organised networks for chairs. There are other ways chairs can access mutual support, like mentoring, coaching and action learning. They are not the focus of this particular guide but the organisations in the 'Useful Contacts' section can advise further about other ways of supporting chairs.

Why set up a network for chairs?

Learning and peer support

A network can help chairs support each other in the way that is most useful to them. It may be around an issue for their charity or for the chair at a specific time. Charity Trustee Networks suggest that a chairs network can be an opportunity for chairs to have 'role specific conversations' - for example, to talk through how to handle a conflict between board members. This is probably the most valuable function of a network – enabling peer support and shared troubleshooting.

Providing briefing on key issues

The trustee board is not always involved in day-to-day operations – but they are still required to maintain an overview, particularly where decisions are needed on complex changes in policy or services. As chair of board meetings, the chair can be in a good position to act as a point of contact or channel of information to trustees.

Sometimes, the information need is quite specific. In greater Manchester, the key factor behind setting up a chairs network was to help inform chairs and trustees about a major new policy initiative called ChangeUp. Chief executives had been heavily involved in discussions about this initiative but there was a concern that the trustee boards may not have had the same opportunities to hear about ChangeUp and to discuss the implications.

Accessing development and services as a group

A network for chairs can be a useful and economical way of providing support in a group format – with the advantage of participants being able to share their own experiences as they go along. This is why the North Wiltshire Chairs Network was set up by the local Council for Voluntary Service. The network may also be an opportunity to provide specialist services – such as legal advice on trading or trustee liability.

Meeting a specific need

Sometimes a network may be established to meet a very specific need. The Network of Women Chairs was set up in part to encourage women to go on to chair larger charities. This was developed following a model of a similar network for chief executives of charities.

Consultation and voice

Networks enable chairs to be consulted about policy matters and provide opportunities for the voice of chairs to be expressed. It may lead to opportunities to represent chairs' perspectives on other bodies.

What do participants get out of a network?

When Charity Trustee Networks asked members of trustee and chair networks how they felt they had benefited from joining a network, they reported that:

- They valued the opportunity to be briefed in person on key issues, to better “see the wood from the trees” as one chair in Hampshire put it.
- They had a better understanding of the voluntary sector and their roles and responsibilities as trustees and chairs.
- They built up greater networks of contacts and could talk to others about how they had handled a particular problem.
- They had more confidence, for example in handling difficult situations at meetings. Chairs reported that they felt less isolated when they had access to a network.
- They had developed and shared practical resources such as induction packs or committee structures.

How to set up a network for chairs

Seven steps to establishing a network

1. Identify the need for the network, either by holding a planning meeting or conducting a survey, and identify how to start – perhaps an inaugural meeting.
2. Decide how your network is going to operate logistically. Work out the practicalities. Who will be responsible for booking venues and sending out meeting papers? Who will carry out the planning – deciding topics, speakers etc?
3. How will you fund your network? Will you make use of existing resources or will you apply for a grant? Will there be a host organisation, sponsor or membership fee?
4. Decide on your membership and set up your mailing list.
5. Hold the first meeting – this could involve a speaker or could be a general introduction or planning session.
6. Consult with members to decide on future dates and activities, perhaps by having a planning group or through an evaluation form distributed at the end of the first meeting.
7. You're away!

1. Identifying the need

First, find out if another network exists. Check your local public library, local authority or voluntary sector umbrella groups such as a Council for Voluntary Service (CVS).

No network? Secondly, then, how do you go about establishing the need? There are two popular methods: the planning group or the survey.

The planning group

Bring together a group of interested chairs to talk through feasibility and desirability of setting up a network. Some of the questions you could ask are:

- What is the network about?
- Who is it for?
- How will the members benefit?
- How will the network function e.g. meeting frequency, meeting times, administrative support, chairing meetings, etc?

The survey

If you intend to seek external funding you may want to conduct a more systematic survey to establish evidence of need. You could devise a questionnaire for chairs to be completed by post, telephone, as part of a meeting or a combination of these. A sample questionnaire is set out on page 21. You may find an umbrella agency is willing to assist with this survey, by providing contact details or support from staff.

2. The practicalities

There are a number of practical tasks involved in running a network:

- maintaining a contact database
- planning meetings and other activities
- designing publicity material
- printing and distributing publicity material
- evaluating / reviewing activities
- organising specific activities – meetings, newsletters, special events, e-mail discussions etc.

If you hold meetings, as most networks interviewed for this guide do, then you will need to consider:

- booking venues, catering, audiovisual requirements and any particular communication or access needs
- handling bookings
- photocopying handouts
- meeting and greeting
- making sure meetings run smoothly (will the catering arrive on time? Are there enough seats?).

There are three common models for organising a chairs network:

A self-help or independent model

The network can be run entirely independently from another organisation, over time registering as a charity and even having its own base. The West Midlands Charity Trustees Forum is an example of a trustee network organised in this way.

A parent body

The network may be administered by an existing agency. A popular example is a voluntary sector umbrella agency like a local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) or Rural Community Council. Hampshire Chairs Forum and North Wiltshire Chairs Network are both organised like this.

Some parent bodies only provide administration (booking the venue, advertising, taking bookings) and leave all planning and decision making to a planning group drawn from the network.

Other parent bodies are more involved, running the network as one of their services and consulting with network members to plan meetings and activities. This is what happens in North Wiltshire. They do this because it is part of the CVS's aims and objectives to provide support for voluntary organisations.

A host or sponsor body

Chairs are a target group for many private sector suppliers, particularly professional firms in fields such as law and accountancy, and they may be interested in hosting a network. The host will benefit by having contact with potential clients and in return may offer high quality meeting rooms and refreshments free of charge – they may even be willing to handle the administration of the network. This is what happens in the case of the Network of Women Chairs.

A planning group will still need to decide on speakers and topics. Other organisations keen to make links with the voluntary sector, like independent schools, may be interested in acting as a host.

3. How will the network be funded?

A parent organisation

A parent organisation may be willing to provide staff time to administer the network without charge. They may do this because it is part of their aim to support or develop a network – and you may only be asking for a few hours a month of administrative time.

You may need some funding to book a meeting room and for refreshments, if the parent organisation does not have these resources. Communication with network members is free by e-mail, but if you are sending out hard copy, this does have a cost implication.

The role of a sponsor or host

A sponsor may be willing to provide a venue and refreshments free of charge. They may also cover the administration of publicity and bookings. If you are lucky enough to have this arrangement, then you already have your core costs covered.

Venues provided by network members

Sometimes network members may be willing to host the meeting at a meeting room of their place of work or of their charity. You will still need to cover the administration of bookings and probably refreshment costs.

To charge or not to charge

Most networks do not charge for events, although some networks do charge a reasonable fee to those chairs attending to offset against the costs of administering and running events. One network charges a membership fee. This fee does not cover the running costs of the network (which is free, being provided by a sponsor) but is used as a fund for training and development opportunities for members.

Grant funding

A grant can help cover the costs of venue hire and refreshments and allow a small fund to cover speakers' travel expenses. This is what happens in North Wiltshire.

4. Who will be members?

The purpose of your network will determine the membership, which will in turn affect the way meetings are run and the subject matter of meetings.

The greater Manchester chairs network is open to chairs of infrastructure agencies only. This means the total eligible membership is quite small – only 40 people. Meetings focus on a specific issue.

Hampshire Chairs Forum is open to all chairs of voluntary organisations in Hampshire. This means the total eligible membership is quite high – around 400 – with 50-60 attending each meeting.

If your network has a small, defined membership, there is more scope for in-depth confidential discussion or discussion on specific topics – but it also demands a higher level of commitment from members. A larger network, on the other hand, can have a broad agenda with more networking opportunities – but will offer fewer opportunities for in-depth confidential discussion.

How many might you expect at your meeting?

Looking at a small sample of chairs networks, there tends to be a turnout of between 15% and 40% of the total mailing list. The main variation is size of mailing list – the bigger the mailing list, the lower overall proportion of attendees.

The mailing list

It is recommended that you start with a manageable list that can grow over time. When the Network of Women Chairs was established, the initial membership was made of existing contacts along with contacts on the mailing list of the host sponsor. They also advertised in *governance* magazine (see 'Useful Contacts'). Make sure you include a data protection clause when collecting data and that you comply with the data protection legislation when storing data.

You could contact your local or sector-specific umbrella body – they may have a directory of organisations you could access to mail out a general flyer. If you do this, aim to send out the invitation at least six weeks before the meeting to allow sufficient time for the invitation to be forwarded onto the chair.

One of the most efficient and direct ways of gathering a membership list is to circulate a piece of paper at each meeting to collect names, addresses and e-mail addresses. Chairs rarely have an office at their charity so it is important you have their desired contact details – at home or at their place of work.

5. The first meeting

The face-to-face meeting is the core activity for most of the networks for chairs interviewed for this guide. What might your first meeting look like? It could be:

- a planning meeting to discuss what the network could cover in the future
- a one-off 'event' as a trial, featuring an invited guest speaker or a speaker who is a chair from amongst the potential membership, and incorporating an opportunity to talk about a possible future network
- the first of a programme of events and speakers.

Venues

The choice of venue and the layout of the room can be critical.

- Is it the right location? Where will people be travelling from? Will they be able to get there for the time of the meeting (say, if the meeting is straight after work)?
- Who provides the venue? Is it free – perhaps provided by a sponsor or a network member? Is it important to have the same venue each time?
- If you have to pay for the venue and/or refreshments, how will costs be covered?
- How will the room be set out? Café style is popular, where groups of six to eight chairs sit around tables, as it gives chairs a chance to get to know a smaller number of people better.
- Is it accessible to all?

How some existing networks organise their meetings

Hampshire Chairs Forum

Meets: twice a year

Venue: easily accessible by all forms of transport due to being held after work

Programme: 6pm networking – wine and nibbles; 6.45pm speaker; 7.15pm questions; 7.45pm networking; Close 8.15-8.30pm

Network of Women Chairs

Meets: quarterly.

Venue: Central London, hosted by a professional firm.

Programme: 4-6pm – guest speaker, speaker from within membership or question and answer panel.

North Wiltshire Chairs Network

Meets: quarterly.

Venue: same venue each time.

Programme: 7-9pm – speaker; questions; networking (half an hour); 'our group' (a member talks about their organisation); update from CVS.

Activities and speakers

A popular highlight of a network meeting is an invited speaker. Topics could include:

- legal issues
- incorporation – benefits and disadvantages
- financial management – budgeting, insurance, reserves
- fundraising
- the challenges of being a chairperson
- volunteering
- recruiting trustees
- governance standards, codes and tools.

The speaker could present for 20 minutes or so, and then members could break into small groups to discuss the issues before a question and answer session.

Network members may be willing to share some of their own experiences – or they may have a specific topic or area of interest. Some possible topics include:

- getting the best from your trustees – a chair's perspective
- recruitment, selection and induction of trustees – how we did it
- diversity and how to achieve it
- assessing your board's performance
- fundraising – pinnacles and pitfalls.

Another possibility is to ask a staff member from within an organisation to talk about their perspective of the trustee board.

One downside of choosing a specific topic for an event is that it may not be of universal interest to chairs – there are likely to be some for whom that issue is not a priority for them at that time. One way around this, is to include plenty of time for more general discussion and networking.

A tried and tested model is to have an annual panel discussion where attendees bring issues or questions to present to an 'expert' panel. The panel could include a chair from the network, a trainer or consultant, a legal expert and a representative of an umbrella organisation.

6. The planning group

A network for chairs will survive when people are willing, not just to attend, but to take some lead in running it.

A number of the existing networks have a planning group that meets periodically to help decide on speakers and activities.

Some are formally organised: Hampshire Chairs Forum has a planning group of five members drawn from the Forum's membership and is chaired by the chair of Community Action Hampshire (the 'parent' body).

Alternatively, you may prefer to hold the planning group informally at the end of each meeting. At the national network of large charities, chairs interested in planning were asked to join a table during the final networking session. About 10 people, on average, met and decided on the speaker and venue for the next meeting.

It is a good idea for the planning group to think through the tasks involved in running the network – go back to the list on page 9. The roles of the planning group could include:

- membership list manager
- venue organiser
- newsletter writer / communicator
- meeting organiser.

Not all networks have a planning group. Some networks that are co-ordinated by a parent organisation have a member of staff that consults with the group about their desired events and activities and captures feedback on the frequency and timing of meetings. Often, these networks conduct a more formal evaluation, using evaluation forms at the end of meetings and annual questionnaires or telephone interviews with members.

What other services could a network provide?

Although the meeting is a core activity for many networks, some provide other services. These can provide a menu of opportunities for chairs that may be relevant at different stages in their chairmanship and in the life of their charity.

Newsletter

North Wiltshire Chairs Network send out a quarterly newsletter in between their quarterly meetings. They feel that this helps maintain communication between meetings.

Website

A website can be used to post copies of handouts from previous meetings or hold downloadable documents – for example, members could be encouraged to share their organisation's policies and procedures or induction packs.

Group communications

An e-mail discussion group allows members to contact each other informally. You can establish this very easily using a free service like Yahoo Groups. Alternatively, you may compile a sheet of contact details to circulate to members.

Some networks find virtual communication works as well and even better than face-to-face meetings because of the logistical problems of meeting up in a large geographical area.

Small group discussions

Small group activities can run alongside the wider network – or they could run on their own, if you find that this is the main need identified. The ways for smaller groups to network include:

- Telephone conferences can be useful when a group of chairs can't meet face-to-face but want to discuss a matter in a small group.
- Informal lunch meetings are a good way for smaller groups to share experience on a particular topic.
- Meeting at events, such as conferences, where breaks in the programme can be an ideal time for a semi-formal or informal meeting.
- Action learning sets are where a small group of chairs meet on a regular basis to share issues specific to their circumstances.

Action Learning

Action learning is a model of development for a group of peers, where they come together to focus on their individual development or organisational development. A small group of around six chairs would agree to meet for a series of meetings over a period of time, perhaps a year or eighteen months. At each meeting there is a structure that is followed, whereby chairs have a turn to share a particular issue or challenge that they face at their organisation. Fellow members ask questions aiming to assist that chair in coming to a deeper understanding of their issue, assisting him or her to review options and decide on action.

Action learning can provide an opportunity for chairs to reflect on their role and their performance and can encourage a discipline of asking the important, searching questions that get to the heart of an issue.

Mentoring – formal or informal

A network could enable members to seek mentors. This could be through a formal process of listing those seeking or willing to provide mentoring and making a mentoring format and voluntary contract available. It could also be informal encouraging people to share contact details and make individual arrangements when these might be helpful.

What makes a network successful?

Hints and tips from existing networks:

- pay attention to room layout – café style works well
- don't try and do too much at once – start off with a small event then build up if desired
- include informal time for networking and refreshments
- don't be put off by a small attendance
- get people to take 'ownership' of the network, whether via a planning group, a parent organisation or some key people to drive the network forward
- keep asking members what they want – it could be five minutes at the end of a meeting or it could be by formal evaluation
- keep in regular contact with members – don't leave it more than a couple of months
- encourage regular communication between the group
- give plenty of notice of meetings – less than four weeks may mean people cannot attend
- remind people about meetings – more than three months notice and people may forget!
- don't overload attendees with paper
- try and obtain contact details for the chair themselves, rather than for the organisation
- meet and greet new members
- where events are free, allow for the fact that actual attendance may fall short of the total number of people who indicated that they would attend
- make sure you keep in touch with those who cannot attend a particular meeting – perhaps send out a short report of what took place and key actions arising
- set dates and topics several meetings in advance if you can
- find a common ground – it might be geographical location, client group or topic
- review the network's progress to identify how it can be improved.

Sustaining a network

Once the first meeting has taken place, you need to consider how you can ensure the network will continue to develop successfully. This will need support from the members and the commitment of the parent body or other administrative resources in place.

- The support of a parent organisation can be an important factor. Some Councils for Voluntary Service have established a network and see it as one of their key services. If a network has the backing and support of a parent organisation, this will often help keep the network going when members' time or network funds may otherwise be short.
- A host or sponsor who is willing to cover the administrative and venue costs can help ensure a network can sustain itself financially.
- In a completely independent network you may need to rely on small grants, free venues, membership fees or a combination of these.
- Diversifying into new activities can help sustain a network. In Hampshire, the Chairs Forum led to the establishment of a Treasurers' Forum. Both forums meet on the same evening in the same venue but split into separate groups for the speakers and discussions: using the same venue in this way cuts down costs.
- To sustain a network you ultimately need the support of the members. If the members feel the network is valuable and useful, they will come. You then need to have some key people who will be willing to take things forward. The ideas about the planning group on page 14 should help you put in place plans early on.

Case study – taking things forward in greater Manchester

The greater Manchester infrastructure chairs network is at an early stage in its development, having launched last year. Between the first and second meetings David Sutcliffe, network co-ordinator at Greater Manchester Council for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO – the ‘parent’ body), conducted telephone interviews with members who could not attend the first meeting.

David is open about how the network may develop: “how it communicates is up for grabs – previous experience shows that face-to-face meetings are not always that well attended because of the problems of getting to meetings. Maybe there will be a preference shown for virtual means of communication. It may well be the case that they opt for less frequent meetings, maybe one or two a year, and then exchange resources online.”

David has set up a virtual trustee network in the past, which has worked well.

David feels the network should focus on those issues that are specific to the membership – in this case, the ChangeUp agenda and how to better co-ordinate infrastructure services.

There was funding for the start up costs of the network only. David hopes the network “will then have a life of its own and can be sustained”.

Useful resources

Umbrella or support agencies can be a valuable source of information and, in some cases, practical support.

Charity Trustee Networks

Charity Trustee Networks exist to provide trustees and management committee members with opportunities to access help, support and advice by sharing knowledge and experience with each other. As a result many networks have been set up across the country and work very effectively on a face-to-face basis. Charity Trustee Networks has recently launched **trusteenet**, a free national online network for trustees. Register now on www.trusteenet.org.uk to benefit from:

- up-to-date information about key issues affecting your role
- the opportunity to contribute your views to influence national policy
- networking online with other trustees and management committee members
- access to a range of benefits – free and discounted – to support your role as a trustee.

www.trusteenet.org.uk

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The Governance Hub

The Governance Hub is a partnership of organisations working to improve the quality of governance throughout the voluntary and community sector in England. Their website and helpline are gateways to a wide range of resources on governance and trusteeship.

www.governancehub.org.uk

The Governance Hub, NCVO, Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL

Helpline: 0800 652 4886 (9am to 6pm Mon-Fri)

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action

This is the national body for Councils for Voluntary Service and other local 'infrastructure' organisations. Their website contains a list of local members.

www.navca.org.uk

177 Arundel Street, Sheffield S1 2NU

Tel: 0114 278 6636

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations is the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in England. Their website contains downloadable guidance on trusteeship and governance.

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL

Helpdesk: 0800 2 798 798

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Contacting other networks

Making contact with other networks for chairs can be a useful way to learn in more detail from the experiences of others. Better still, you may be able to visit a network to see them in action. Contact Charity Trustee Networks (details above) for a list of chairs networks around the country.

Questionnaire for Chairs of Infrastructure Organisations

The aim of this questionnaire is to explore the feasibility of a network for chairs for local infrastructure organisations in

We would be really grateful if you would spend a few minutes completing this questionnaire.

1. What support do you get as a chair? (please tick all that apply)

- Training
- From another chair
- From a network of chairs
- From a national organisation
- From a local group or forum
- I do not feel that I have received any support as a chair
- Other (please specify)

2. What support would you like as a chair? (please tick all that apply)

- Briefings on voluntary and community sector issues
- Handbook
- Meetings with other chairs
- E-group or newsletter
- Training
- Access to professional advice
- Induction
- Mentoring / coaching
- I do not think that I need further support
- Other (please specify)

3. Would you be interested in meeting with chairs of other local infrastructure organisations in ?

- Yes No Not sure

4. How often should this group meet?

- Annually 2 times a year Quarterly

5. What time of day would you prefer to meet?

Weekday am pm evening

Weekend am pm evening

6. Which of the following areas for discussion would interest you?

(please tick all that apply)

- Sharing best practice
- Relationship with the Chief Executive / Appraisal
- Collaborative working
- Running effective Board Meetings
- Diversity
- Appraisal of the Board
- Other (please specify)

If you would like to receive further information about the development of a network for chairs for please let us have your e-mail address. It will not be used for any other purpose.

E-mail

Thank you.

Chairs are the backbone of well-run voluntary organisations. The effectiveness of the chair's role is central to a well run organisation.

Setting Up a Network for Chairs focuses on how chairs can access mutual support via an organised network. It provides an overview of how to set up a chairs network and has been developed in conjunction with Charity Trustee Network, the national organisation that exists to support trustees and to develop networks of trustees.

The Governance Hub exists to improve governance within the voluntary and community sector in England by:

- increasing the supply of trustees
- enhancing trustee learning and development
- strengthening and extending support services for trustees.

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ctn

Charity Trustee Network is the national organisation that seeks to represent trustees' views on policy matters. It highlights the most important issues for trustees and chairs and will capture and present their views mainly through trustee networks, supported by a national policy development group, an e-mail reference group and debate on www.trusteenet.org.uk