



Knight Charity Governance

Chris Knight

ENGAGE

trustees' responsibilities



knightcharitygovernance.uk

Engage

trustees' responsibilities

The duties and responsibilities of trustees are set out in law. The practical outworking of these is explained well by the Charity Commission and in The Charity Governance Code. But there is one critical action at the heart of all this: **engage**.

The duties advised by the Charity Commission are:

1. Ensure your charity is carrying out its purposes for the public benefit
2. Comply with your charity's governing document and the law
3. Act in your charity's best interests (including managing conflicts of interest)
4. Manage your charity's resources responsibly (including finances but also other assets)
5. Act with reasonable care and skill (your duty of care)
6. Ensure your charity is accountable (including reporting to the Charity Commission)

See further: [The essential trustee Charity Commission guidance](#)

The principles and recommended good practice set out in The Charity Governance Code concern:

1. Foundation principle
2. Organisational purpose
3. Leadership
4. Ethics and culture
5. Decision making
6. Managing resources and risks
7. Equity, diversity and inclusion
8. Board effectiveness

The Charity Governance Code used to be offered in two versions, for large and small charities, with diagnostic self-check tools for a charity to assess its own governance health. The latest version of the Code was published in 2025 following extensive consultation. The steering group responsible for the Code is currently considering how charities might use the Code in a more interactive way and a new website is due to be launched in 2026.

See further: [The Charity Governance Code](#)

I recommend trustees read and absorb both these resources: they are complementary. You don't need to know everything about these areas, but you need to commit to engage with them in the interests of your charity and to fulfil your role. You also don't need to know everything about charity finances, risk management, fundraising, safeguarding, property and other assets, or even the detail of your charity's projects or grant making. However, again, you need to engage in understanding what you can of all this to equip you to make decisions and to govern effectively. There's that word again: **engage**.

Many charities have been failed by their trustees over the years and lessons can be learned from these cautionary tales. Charity Commission reports of investigations and interventions detail a parade of such episodes. There are broadly two types of failure: deliberate and accidental. The type of trustee who deliberately does wrong in relation to a charity may not want to learn lessons. However, all other new and serving trustees should be able to gain by understanding the role better. Virtually every aspect of trustees' work can be performed well by full engagement.

This may all seem daunting. So, how do you go about improving your understanding? How do you engage in this? You need a plan, which should be tailored for your own charity, but an outline you can adapt is this:

1. Find out (a questionnaire works well) what experience each trustee has, in this charity, other charities and other organisations. Lay this alongside the skills and experience you think are needed for your board.
2. Ask all trustees to read carefully The Charity Commission's Essential Trustee guidance and The Charity Governance Code.
3. Set aside 2 hours for the whole board (all trustees should attend) to meet and go through these and share points of understanding and doubt, relevance to your charity, and matters which need addressing.
4. Seek some support from someone who is well experienced in governance matters and either ask them to facilitate the session above or to field questions arising.
5. Hold an annual review meeting for trustees' duties and responsibilities.

If your charity has senior professional leadership staff, they should be involved in the above exercise too, because they and the trustees need to understand and support each other's role.

Copyright © Knight Charity Governance

<https://knightcharitygovernance.uk>