



Charities: Trustees' Responsibilities

It is often considered an honour to act as a trustee for a charity and an opportunity to give something back to the community. However, becoming a trustee involves a certain commitment and level of responsibility which should not be underestimated.

Whether you are already a trustee for a charity, be it a local project or a household name, or are thinking of becoming involved, there are a number of responsibilities that being a trustee places upon you.

We outline the main responsibilities below, but please contact us for further clarification on any point.

Background

The charities sector is generally overseen by the Charity Commission. The Commission is a government department that requires the registration of most charities.

The Commission plays an important role in the charity sector and is in place to give the public confidence in the integrity of charities.

All charities need to demonstrate that their aims are for the public benefit, initially as part of their application process to the Charities Commission and subsequently each year at the time they prepare their annual report.

A key part of the Commission's work is to provide advice to trustees. A great deal of useful advice can be found on the Commission's website (www.charitycommission.gov.uk), where there is a section dedicated to Trustees, staff and volunteers.

Types of charity

Charities can be created in a number of ways but are usually either:

- incorporated under the Companies Act 2006 or earlier (limited company charities)
- incorporated under the Charities Act 2011 (Charitable Incorporated Organisations – CIOs) or
- created by a declaration of trust (unincorporated charities).

Since early 2013, the Commission has started to register CIOs. CIOs have benefits similar to a limited company charity. This means that the members and trustees are usually personally safeguarded from the financial liabilities of the charity and that the charity has its own legal personality which means trustees do not have to take out contracts in their own names. CIOs do not have to register with Companies House but they do need to register with the Charity Commission.

All charities are affected by the Charities Act 2011, which was a consolidating act bringing together a number of pieces of existing legislation.

The type of the charity will determine the full extent of a trustee's responsibilities.

Who is a Trustee?

The Charities Act 2011 defines trustees as 'persons having the general control and management of the administration of a charity'. This definition would typically include:

- for unincorporated charities and CIOs, members of the executive or management committee
- for limited company charities, the directors or members of the management committee.

Trustee restrictions and liabilities

In addition to the responsibilities of being a trustee, there are also a number of restrictions which may apply. These are aimed at preventing a conflict of interest arising between a trustee's personal interests and their duties as a trustee. These provide that generally:

- trustees cannot benefit personally from the charity, although reasonable out of pocket expenses may be reimbursed
- trustees cannot be employees of the charity.

There are limited exceptions to these principles. Where trustees do not act prudently, lawfully or in accordance with their governing document they may find themselves personally responsible for any loss they cause to the charity.

Trustees' responsibilities

The CC guidance 'Becoming a trustee' explains what it means to be a trustee and how to become one. Trustees have full responsibility for the charity and are required to:

- follow the law and the rules in the charity's governing document
- act responsibly and only in the interests of the charity
- use reasonable care and skill and
- make well-informed decisions, taking advice when they need to.

The Charity Commission publication CC3, 'The essential trustee: what you need to know' provides more detailed guidance for both new and existing trustees. The guidance sets out trustees' duties and responsibilities under five broad headings:

- responsibilities
- compliance
- duty of prudence
- duty of care
- when things go wrong.

In particular, trustees are under a legal duty to make sure that their charity's funds are only applied in the furtherance of its charitable objects. They need to be able to demonstrate that this is the case, so they should keep records which are capable of doing this.

Accounting requirements

There are particular requirements for most charities to:

- keep full and accurate accounting records (and funds requirements are of particular importance here)
- prepare charity accounts and an annual report
- to ensure an audit or independent examination is carried out
- to submit an annual return, annual report and accounts to the Charity Commission (and, for limited company charities, to Companies House).

The extent to which these requirements have to be met generally depends upon the type of charity and how much income is generated.

Funds requirements

An important aspect of accounting for charities is the understanding of the different 'funds' that a charity can have. The effective management and control of fundraising is an important trustee responsibility.

Essentially funds represent the income of the charity and there may be restrictions on how certain types of funds raised can be used. For example, a donation may be received only on the understanding that it is to be used for a specified purpose.

It is then the trustees' responsibility to ensure that such 'restricted' funds are used only as intended.

The annual report

The annual report is often a fairly comprehensive document, as legislation sets out the minimum amount of information that has to be included. The report generally includes:

- a trustees' report (which can double as a directors' report for incorporated charities)
- a statement of financial activities for the year
- an income and expenditure account for the year (for some incorporated charities)
- a balance sheet
- a cashflow statement (for large charities only)
- notes to the accounts (including accounting policies).

Audit requirements

Whether or not a charity requires an audit will depend mainly upon how much income is received or generated. The income limit varies according to the type of charity as follows:

- all charities where income exceeds £500,000 require an audit
- charities (both incorporated and unincorporated) require an independent examination where their income falls between £25,000 and £500,000
- where income is over £250,000 the independent examiner must be suitably qualified.

There are other criteria to consider, particularly regarding total assets, and we would be pleased to discuss these in more detail with you.

Reporting requirements

There is a comprehensive framework in place that determines how a charity's accounts should be prepared.

Unincorporated charities with income below £250,000 may prepare receipts and payments accounts.

All other charities must prepare accounts that show a 'true and fair' view. To achieve this the accounts generally need to follow the requirements of the Charities Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP).

How we can help

A trustee's responsibilities are many and varied. If you would like to discuss these in more detail or would like help in maintaining your charity's accounting records or preparing its annual report please contact us. ☎ 0207 183 9448

We are also able to advise on whether or not an audit or independent examination will be required and are able to carry this out.

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