

charitytimes

Challenge events

A look at how challenge events are driving a surge in income

A sector in waiting

What impact has the UK Supreme Court ruling on sex and gender had?

Case study

What GOSH learned from its first ever live-stream fundraiser

Spring 2026

Are charity leaders reaching their limit?



CAREER PATH

Polly Martin, CEO, of National Trails UK on her unexpected journey

PROFILE

The NCVO's Kate Lee on becoming the sector's new chief cheerleader

REPORT

How are leadership decisions affecting partnerships?



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Editor's comment



Every day, my social media feeds are full of wellness-related content. My LinkedIn feed usually consists of people talking about the benefits of hybrid working and the importance of work-life balance and scrolling through Instagram, I'm mostly greeted with videos promoting therapy, yoga workouts and people talking openly about mental health.

While this might say something about me and the algorithm, I know I'm not alone in being surrounded by a wellness-focussed world. Since the pandemic, a societal shift has pushed mental health and wellbeing to the forefront of people's minds. What

started as a focus on daily walks during lockdowns has quickly escalated into a huge commercial space that is growing alongside us.

Yet, while we appear to have more support than ever, burnout is on the rise and for those working in the charity sector, this movement isn't providing a solution. In fact, last year, 94 charity leaders sought help through ACEVO's 'CEO in Crisis' service, which was an increase of 17.5% on the previous year.

Stats like these prove burnout remains an ever-present shadow, quietly threading through organisations that are busy trying to care for others.

The paradox is stark. Charities are, by nature, committed to solving societal problems, often under the weight of limited resources and constant scrutiny. Staff are driven by mission, but passion does not immunise against exhaustion.

This is an issue we delve into in this edition of *Charity Times* (p.22) as we seek to understand why charity leaders appear to be reaching their limit and what peers can do to help.

We also take a look at areas of

Burnout remains an ever-present shadow, quietly threading through organisations that are busy trying to care for others

growth, such as fundraising challenge events, which are driving a surge in income, but don't come without emotional costs (p.28).

The very structures designed to make life more manageable – remote working, wellbeing initiatives, time-off policies – sometimes feel like plasters on a deeper systemic challenge. High caseloads, emotional labour, and the relentless drive to do more with less continue to have an impact.

Perhaps the real test is not how many wellbeing tools we have at our fingertips, but whether the sector truly has the space and support to use them.

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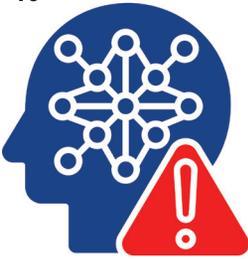
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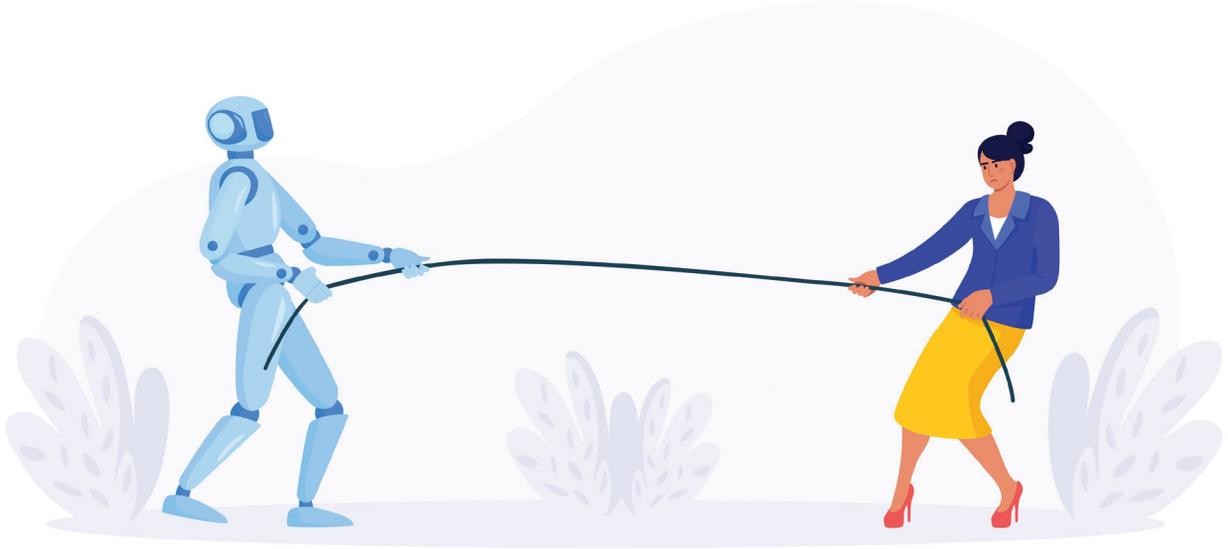
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News in brief



SCRAMBLE TO HOUSE 87 PEOPLE FOLLOWING CHARITY CLOSURE

A council has enacted an emergency response plan to find alternative accommodation for 87 vulnerable people following the closure of Access Community Trust, based in Lowestoft, suddenly closed. Through working with other providers in the area the council has ensured that 75 bed spaces at the charity's property will be retained. The council has also agreed "a short-term solution to the remaining 12 beds" and it is also working to support the more than 200 staff and volunteers impacted by the charity's closure.

X-ODUS SPARKS VIDEO CONTENT BOOM AMONG CHARITIES

Charities' declining use of X is seeing them becoming increasingly innovative with the use of video through other platforms such as TikTok, a report by Enthuse has found.

It found that almost half of charities are using video channels over the last year,

Almost half of charities are using video channels over the last year, compared to a third the previous year

compared to just over a third the previous year. Falling use of Musk's X by charities comes amid concerns over a prominence of right-wing extremist content on the platform and a decline in interest among the public.

BURNOUT FEARS EMERGE FOR YOUNGER CHARITY WORKERS

Younger workers are most at risk of "widespread" burnout across the charity sector, a survey by CharityJob is warning. The recruiter found that almost two in five workers say they often or always feel burned out, this rises to over two in five

among millennials in the sector.

In comparison, the feelings are less pronounced among older workers, with just over a third of those in Generation C and a little over one in four Baby Boomers often or always feeling emotionally exhausted or burned out.

The survey also found that feels of burnout are "widespread" across the charity sector, experienced by almost four in five of all workers at least sometimes.

POLICE CONFIRM ARRESTS AT HEALTH CHARITY'S HOSPITAL

Northamptonshire Police has confirmed it has made a raft of arrests as part of its ongoing investigation into allegations of abuse of patients at St Andrews Healthcare's facility in Northampton. It is also subject to a probe by health regulator the Care Quality Commission (CQC), which has been forced to restrict new admissions amid concerns around patient safety. Police have confirmed that eight people have been arrested on suspicion of wilful neglect and ill



treatment by a care worker in relation to allegations of assault made in July last year. All remain on bail as part of "this complex investigation" said a spokesperson for Northamptonshire Police.

FOUR IN FIVE CHARITY WORKERS FEAR BEING REPLACED BY AI

A survey by Propel Tech has found that four in five charity workers believe artificial intelligence (AI) technology could replace them. A similar proportion are also concerned that AI "has the potential to cause more harm than good". Those working for charities registered

the highest level of concern about the potential harm caused by AI.

COMMUTING 'CHALLENGE' LEADS TO CEOS DEPARTURE

Alex Brooks-Johnson is stepping down as Tinnitus UK's chief executive citing the "particular challenge" of leading a charity based more than 350km from his home. Since he was appointed 18 months ago Sussex coast-based Brooks-Johnson has been leading the Sheffield based charity by remote working and spending time away from his young family.

SUPPORT CHARITY CLOSES AMID FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

A charity that supports young people and adults with education, training and skills is closing after almost two decades, amid financial problems. The Oasis Partnership, which runs The Oasis Café in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, said it has "taken the difficult decision to close the charity" and that "this process is now underway and operations will cease shortly". According to latest accounts submitted and detailed on the charities register the charity's spending has outstripped its income for three of the last four financial years.

Those working for charities registered the highest level of concern about potential harm caused by AI

Regulator news

■ OSCR's transparency changes come into force

From 9 March, the Office of the Scottish Charity Register will publish the full names of charity trustees. The move brings it in line with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, which already published these details. In addition, every account document submitted to the regulator as part of a charity's online annual return will be published in full, without any redactions.

■ Regulator escalates probe into care charity

The Charity Commission has launched a statutory inquiry into a residential care charity for young adults with learning disabilities that owes £1.5m to HMRC. The move escalates the regulator's engagement with Northamptonshire based William Blake House, which started last November when a compliance case was opened.

The regulator said it is "is now escalating its engagement to a statutory inquiry after determining there are serious concerns around possible financial mismanagement which require a formal investigation".

■ Christian charity breached fundraising code

Tamil Christian church charity Immaanuveel has been found in breach of the Fundraising Regulator's code following concerns raised about fundraising for its bid to buy a new church building that subsequently failed.

Civil Society Covenant blighted by delays and U-turns, report warns

The government's commitment to improve its relationship with charities has suffered from a 'slow start', says the report.

Written by **JOE LEPPER AND MELISSA MOODY**

The government's commitment to rebuild its relationship with charities through its Civil Society Covenant has been marred by a "slow start", delays and U-turns, a report is warning, even as ministers roll out fresh funding intended to prove the policy is moving from promise to practice.

In its latest Civic Space Annual Review, NGO organisation Bond said it had welcomed the publication last July of the Covenant and Prime Minister Keir Starmer's commitments to ensure civil society had "a home at the heart of government". However, the group said momentum has since faltered.

"In the months since, little progress has been made on implementation, with delays to the establishment of a joint council central to delivery, and the government seen as turning back on promises made in the Covenant to protect campaigning rights," Bond's review said.

Bond highlighted particular concern about what it sees as an erosion of protest rights through the Crime and Policing Bill currently passing through parliament. The organisation noted this would be the third piece of primary legislation on public order and protest in the last four years, giving police expanded powers to restrict demonstrations and make arrests.

The review also pointed to the government's use of terrorism laws against campaign group Palestine Action as troubling. Judges ruled this month that the group's proscription

was unlawful, though ministers are appealing.

Broader pressures on the sector were also flagged. Bond warned of rising populism and increasing threats and intimidation against charities working with refugees and migrants, arguing the overall environment for civic action is becoming more hostile.

Bibusu Musukwa, Bond's policy and advocacy adviser on civic space, said the findings paint a worrying picture.

"This year's review highlights the challenging operating environment for civil society and campaigners, in a year that has seen the introduction of a Bill that would impose stricter legislation on protests, and a slow start to the Civil Society Covenant," she said.

"It's clear that UK civic space is shrinking, with campaigners facing increasing barriers to work, and some charities forced to shutter their doors against threats of violence from the far-right.

"The UK's global reputation as a peaceful, tolerant country with vibrant civic space has been heavily damaged. Now, the government must act urgently to halt further democratic backsliding, and counter harmful anti-migrant rhetorics that fuel violence and hate.

"Protecting the right to peaceful protest, and implementing the terms of the Civil Society Covenant to support meaningful public scrutiny are crucial steps to defend civil society and restore our international reputation."



UK civic space is shrinking with campaigners facing increasing barriers

What is the Civil Society Covenant?

The Civil Society Covenant itself was launched at a summit at the Science Museum by Prime Minister Keir Starmer and culture secretary Lisa Nandy, with the aim of resetting relations between government and charities.

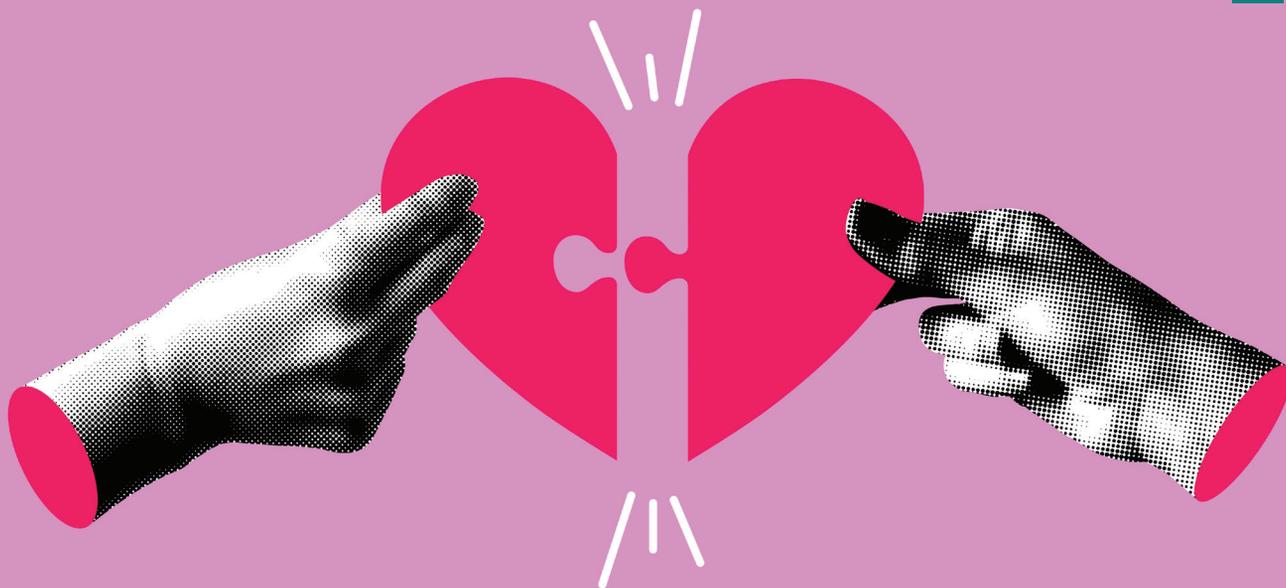
Ministers said the agreement would create a more 'responsive' partnership between the state and the voluntary sector while protecting the independence of civil society organisations to hold government to account.

In the covenant's foreword, the government said it offered "the opportunity to forge a new relationship where government, both national and local, can partner with civil society to create change that lasts generations".

Nandy acknowledged the strain many organisations have faced over the past decade.

"It has been a difficult decade for many civil society organisations who have been asked to do more with less," she said at the launch. "Funding has reduced as need has soared and the right to speak up on behalf of those most in need has routinely been challenged."

The covenant sets out a series of



principles intended to guide the new relationship. Among them is a commitment that civil society should not be expected to replace government services, but instead work in genuine partnership with the state.

The document promises ministers will recognise and value volunteers, respect the sector's independence, enable organisations to hold government to account, and work across departments to deliver policy in partnership. It also pledges to promote participation and strengthen trust through open communication.

A new joint civil society covenant council was announced to provide strategic oversight of implementation, bringing together senior figures from both government and the voluntary sector. A local covenant partnerships programme was also unveiled to boost collaboration in communities most in need.

Funding

Last year, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) unveiled details of a £11.59m package of funding to back the covenant.

The Local Covenant Partnerships Fund will be used to improve collaboration between charities and councils to deliver local support in areas including mental health, social care, women's refuges and tackling child poverty.

It will support 15 unnamed areas in England to set up "local covenant partnership agreements".

"By investing in vital networks of local charities and community organisations, the fund will ensure more people can access services and support that will ease everyday pressures, close to home," the DCMS said.

"It will be targeted at areas most affected by the cost of living, and will strengthen collaboration between organisations in the civil society sector and local authorities, resulting in more joined-up delivery of preventative and self-directed care to benefit communities and individuals."

Examples the DCMS gives of successful existing partnerships include the Synergy VCSE Alliance for Mental Health in Sheffield, which involves peer support workers working with the city's

primary care network.

Another is the Greater Manchester Violence Reduction Unit, which mentors primary school pupils to manage their transition to secondary school and reduce the risk of their involvement in the justice system. This involves charities, councils, youth justice professionals, police, health workers and schools.

Civil society minister Stephanie Peacock said the investment was intended to turn covenant principles into practical change on the ground.

"This £11.59 million investment is about much more than funding, it is about ensuring that whether you are a survivor of domestic abuse, a young person struggling with mental health, or a family facing poverty, you have a support system that is seamless and compassionate," she said.

"By bridging the gap between local councils and the dedicated civil society organisations on the ground, we are turning the principles of our Civil Society Covenant into a daily reality, delivering preventative care that doesn't just manage crises, but changes lives for the better."

Value of wider impact economy revealed

A report has looked at the total value of the wider impact economy, including support offered by charities, socially responsible businesses and more.

Written by [Joe Lepper](#)

A think tank's report has valued the UK impact economy, covering the work of charities and other organisations working for social good, at £428bn.

This figure, which is 15% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), has been revealed in a report by NPC.

It includes £105bn of regulated impact economy, which includes organisations that are legally required to benefit society, including charities, universities, housing associations and community interest companies. The specific value of registered charities to the UK economy is worth £40.6bn.

The think tank's figure also includes £323bn that is self-regulated, involving organisations that work for the public good but are not legally required to, including impact-led businesses, mutual insurers and friendly societies.

NPC chief executive Jonathan Simmons said: "The term 'impact economy' represents a shift in mindset: from a disparate set of sectors, often at odds with one another, to a coherent system bound by shared aspirations.

"It is a simple but powerful idea built around intentionality: the intention to have a positive impact and to help solve the challenges we face, together."

The report has been published two months after the government launched its Office of the Impact Economy to improve philanthropy and social investment. This new unit is housed in the Cabinet Office with chief secretary to the Prime Minister Darren Jones as its ministerial lead.

Setting up the Office for the Impact Economy was among recommendations made by a Social Impact Investment Advisory Group earlier this year involving the Treasury and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Jones says NPC's findings highlight "the vital role of purpose-driven

businesses, charities, philanthropy and investors in our society".

"That's why last year we launched the Office for the Impact Economy to help these organisations work more closely with the government to unlock billions in investments in our communities across the UK and drive national renewal," he added.



Public issues AI trust warning to charities

A survey has found that charities risk losing the public's trust, particularly among older people, if they use artificial intelligence to influence decisions about who needs help.

Written by [Joe Lepper](#)

A survey has found that charities risk losing the public's trust if they use artificial intelligence to influence decisions about who needs help.

According to the survey of 3,000 adults carried out by CharityTracker, two in five say they believe it is "unacceptable" to use AI in this way, compared to one in three who back its deployment in making such decisions.

Older people are more likely to be concerned, with almost half against AI used in decisions around the allocation of frontline support.

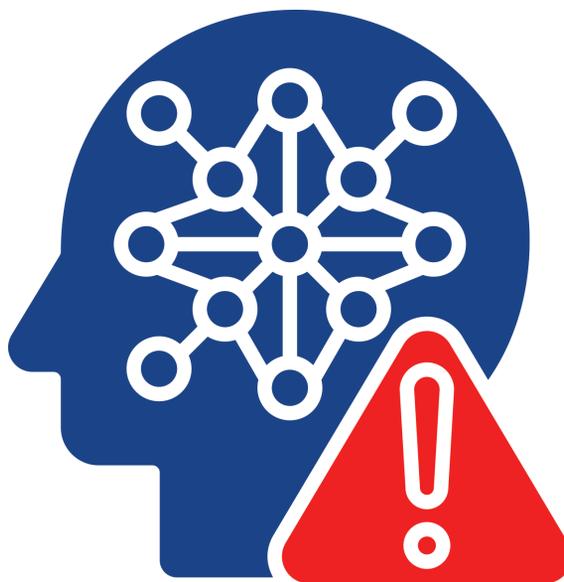
Overall, the survey found the public is divided about charities' use of the technology. While more than a third are positive about charities using AI, a similar proportion are unsure, and more than one in four feel negative.

The most backed uses of AI by charities by the public include to detect fraud and in improving productivity of back-office functions.

Opinion is divided over the use of chatbots to answer enquiries, with two in five backing its use by charities, compared to three in ten who find it unacceptable. Just under half of those surveyed said it is important they can speak to a human when contacting a charity.

Among those surveyed two in five have used chat or writing assistants in the last year, more than a third have used voice assistants, while just under a third report no personal AI use at all.

CharityTracker says its findings show there is concern among the public about AI being used by charities to



make "high-stakes judgements, rather than opposition to the technology itself".

It added: "Even where people recognise potential efficiency gains, there is a clear expectation that decisions affecting access to help remain human-led, accountable, and transparent."

CharityTracker executive director Ashley Rowthorn said: "Charities are rightly exploring AI to manage pressure on services and use their resources more effectively, but this research shows how easy it is to get this wrong.

"The public is not rejecting AI outright. Where it supports people, protects funds, or improves efficiency, there is real permission.

"But when it starts to replace human

judgement in decisions about who receives help, trust quickly falls away".

She added that "familiarity with AI also plays a role "with its use more likely to be backed by those who have used it personally recently".

CharityTracker is urging charities to ensure they have strong governance in place over the use of AI, and are transparent about its use.

"Human accountability is essential to maintaining public confidence," said Rowthorn.

A separate survey released this month found that charity job candidates are becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on their chances of securing roles and future career prospects in the sector.

Man who set up fake charity jailed for five years

A fraudster has been jailed after a fake animal charity left dozens of dogs in horrific conditions nationwide

Written by [Joe Lepper](#)

A man has been jailed for five years after setting up a fake charity to deceive people into handing over their dogs for rehoming, only for the animals to instead be kept in what police have described as “inhumane and appalling conditions”.

Oaveed Rahman, aged 26 of Hope Road, Crays Hill, admitted 11 counts of fraud by false representation and one count of causing unnecessary suffering relating to the animals in his care, when he appeared at Basildon Crown Court in Essex last month.

According to Essex Police, Rahman pretended to run the charity, Save a Paw, but instead conned people into handing him money in return for rehoming and rehabilitation services.

Rahman also admitted possession of a banned XL Bully dog and was given a lifetime ban from owning any animals.

The joint investigation into Rahman involved Essex Police, the RSPCA and Basildon Council, with officers receiving reports relating to his activities in April last year.

The Dogs Trust and the National Animal Welfare Trust have worked alongside the RSPCA to rehome several of the dogs.

A spokesperson for the RSPCA said: “This has been an extremely upsetting case for everyone involved, particularly those who entrusted dogs into his care.”

Dogs Trust’s head of rehoming operations Adam Levy added: “The decision to hand over a dog for rehoming is never taken lightly, and owners placed their trust in Save a



Paw to act in the best interests of their pets. That trust was broken in the most appalling way, with devastating consequences.

“This case highlights the urgent need for stronger regulation of rehoming organisations, including licensing and regular inspections. Without proper oversight, there can be no assurance that organisations are operating in the best interests of the animals in their care.”

Essex Police says this is believed to be the biggest animal cruelty investigation the force has been involved with.

It adds that the causing animal suffering charge relates to 21 dogs and one cat found in Rahman’s care.

Through the searches carried out, officers found the remains of a total of 41 dogs.

“It’s hard to put into the words the effect Rahman’s offending has had, not just in Basildon and Essex, but across the country,” said superintendent Leigh Norris.

“All the officers involved in this case,

alongside our partners at the RSPCA, Basildon Council and the Crown Prosecution Service, worked tirelessly and meticulously to gather the vital evidence needed to ensure Rahman pays for his crimes.

“We know we cannot give everyone the answers they are looking for, but I hope they can be reassured that our extensive queries, which involved speaking to people across the UK, left Rahman with no option but to plead guilty.”

Norris added: “I want to thank everyone who shared vital information with us. It was invaluable and enabled us to build this case and secure a conviction and custodial sentence.

“We may never truly know the extent of his offending. The remains of a number of animals were unfortunately unidentifiable. We would dearly love to have been able to update every previous owner who made a report to us, but this was not possible. The loss which previous owners feel is not lost on us.”

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People on the move

The latest appointments from across the charity sector

If you have any appointments to announce please contact melissa.moody@charitytimes.com



CHARLOTTE THOMSON
The **Royal Society of Arts** has announced the appointment of Charlotte Thomson

in a newly-created role of director of strategy and creative. Most recently, she was as head of strategy at Universal Music UK, where she drove strategic change across communications, public policy, artist development, and international marketing. Thomson is also a trustee on the board of the Foundation for Future London.



CHRIS REED
St John Ambulance has announced the appointment of Chris Reed as its new director

of volunteering support. Reed joins the charity from the Scouts, where he recently served as interim executive director of operations, leading on volunteer engagement and transformation. Over his 20+ year career, he has held a number of senior leadership roles at charities across the sector including Barnardo's.



DR LEIGH BRODY
GOSH Charity has welcomed two members to its board, Dr Leigh Brody (pictured) and

Kevin Aitchison MBE.

Brody is an investment manager at AlbionVC, where she invests in transformative technologies and therapeutics within the life sciences sector. Aitchison is managing director, head of Europe at Savills Investment Management. He was previously chair of GB Wheelchair Rugby and in 2021, was awarded an MBE.



GILES PEEL
Blind Veterans UK has announced Giles Peel as its new chair.

He previously served as chair of Combat Stress from 2019 until 2025. Before that he chaired RFEA Ltd. He has built governance expertise in all the major UK sectors. He manages his own company advising on risk, regulatory and strategic governance, and has held executive and non-executive roles across, financial services, legal, NHS and veterans' organisations.



JO WOOLLEY
Cycling UK has welcomed Jo Woolley as its new director of finance and operations.

Trained as a professional accountant (ACCA), she spent her early career in retail and financial services, before making the decision to move to the charity sector in 2008. There, she joined the Woodland Trust, overseeing its Finance, Legacy Administration and Procurement Team for 13 years. She was then appointed director of finance and operations at Earthwatch.

People on the move

JOSEPH WANG'ENDO

Ripple Effect has announced the appointment of Joseph Ngwachi Wang'endo as global director of income generation and engagement. He will be based in Nairobi. With his appointment, half of Ripple Effect's senior leadership team is now based in Africa, showing it's commitment to becoming an African-led NGO. He joins from (Africa CDC) in Addis Ababa, where he held a senior role in strategy, partnerships and resource mobilisation.



QUINTON NEWELL

The Motor Neurone Disease Association has welcomed Quinton Newell as the charity's first chief operating officer. Newell brings experience from his 25-year career working in both public and third sector organisations and joins from the Association from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) where he oversaw finance, information systems, governance, assurance and business operations.



LAURA WALSH

Starlight, a charity that champions the importance of play for seriously ill children, has appointed Laura Walsh as its new director of play in healthcare. Walsh has stepped up from her previous role as head of play at the organisation, a position she has held since joining the charity in September 2021. Prior to joining Starlight, she was head of play services at Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) charity between 2018 and 2021.



RADHA CHAKRABORTY

BookTrust has appointed Radha Chakraborty as its new chair. She takes over the role from outgoing chair John Coughlan CBE. She is currently campaigns director of DMI, and was previously vice-chair of BookTrust until 2024. Chakraborty also brings experience of the charity sector, having previously worked for Comic Relief, and of the wider arts sector in her role as a non-executive director at Screen Yorkshire.



DR MARIA NEOPHYTOU

Nordoff and Robbins, the music therapy charity, has announced the appointment of Dr Maria Neophytou as its new chief executive officer. She takes over the reins from outgoing CEO, Sandra Schembri, joining the organisation from NSPCC, where she has been executive director of strategy and knowledge since 2020. Neophytou has also been acting CEO, ensuring smooth operations and continuity during a leadership change.



VICKI SELLICK

The **Good Things Foundation** has announced the appointment of Vicki Sellick MBE as its new chief executive designate. Previously, Sellick led the charity arm of the charity St John Ambulance. Prior to this, she was chief partnership officer at social innovation lab, the Innovation Foundation. In recognition of her work, Sellick was awarded an MBE in 2021 for her services towards social action.



Authentic leadership: is it for everyone?

“Leadership is not the same for minoritised people”



**SRABANI SEN
IS CEO AND
FOUNDER OF
FULL COLOUR**

The term “authentic leadership” has been a phrase bandied around for quite a few years now. But are there leaders for whom being authentic is a privilege from which they are excluded?

I am currently developing a programme to support career women of colour into senior leadership roles. Research I commissioned to support this work shocked even me.

The literature is clear. Having minoritised characteristics actively prevents women of colour from being authentic leaders. They simply can't afford to be authentic. To rise up the leadership ladder they need to sacrifice authenticity for self-protection.

While my work focuses on women of colour, much of what I discovered will relate to others with minoritised characteristics, and particularly those who have more than one.

Take research from the Runnymede Trust and the Fawcett Society (2022) which showed that 75% of women of colour have experienced racism at work. If you had experienced this, would you want to open yourself up to further abuse by being “authentic”?

2024 research by Williams and Okafar shows women of colour are actively pressured NOT to be authentic. They are pushed to modify their appearance, change their communication style and delete cultural expressions to fit into organisational norms.

More 2024 research by Davis and Ahmed shows that women of colour are forced to make active, strategic choices about when to be authentic leaders and balance this with organisational expectations of them.

I set up and run a network of women leaders of colour called Together We Rise. In discussing authentic leadership, members raised a plethora of issues, e.g.:

- It is harder to authentically be yourself at work given colleagues around you see (and judge) you

through filters of conscious and unconscious bias

- Experiences of covert and unconscious bias make it feel psychologically unsafe to be authentic
- Women leaders of colour are under continuous pressure to prove and prove again why they should be at the table, which impedes authenticity

The systemic and interpersonal biases women leaders of colour face mean they are regularly having to manage and contain their emotions at work, making it much harder to be or want to be authentic.

There are ways to be an authentic leader as a minoritised person - if that's what you want. We just have to be more planned about it.

We need to get ultra specific and detailed in our thinking about what authenticity at work means. Which aspects of “me” do I want to bring to work? Which aspects of “myself” might I share with some and not others?

We have to calculate when it is either safe or necessary to be authentic at work. E.g. We need to work out in advance within what specific settings is it safe to be authentic. We have to identify the risks specific to working in our organisation of being authentic, and then how to mitigate or avoid those risks.

It can be confusing as a minoritised leader to know how to respond to the constant expectations to be authentic. It is important to pause and to recognise that we have a choice. None of us owe anyone authenticity. It is up to us to make up our own minds about whether and how to show up as an authentic leader, and to decide what that looks like.

Leadership is not the same for minoritised people.

The sooner we realise that approaches to leadership are not a “one size fits all”, the easier it will be for minoritised people to build a leadership career, so the rest of us can benefit from their talent and expertise.

It's leadership, but not as we know it

“Sharing power is part of what we're learning how to do”

As my co-leadership journey alongside Clare Mills starts to unfold, we've been talking a lot more about feminist leadership. As much as I wear my feminist heart on my sleeve, it wasn't until I started thinking about the leaders I had experienced throughout my career – and how we were doing things a bit differently at CFG – that I started to think about it more deeply.

Feminist leadership is usually defined as a values-driven approach to leadership that redistributes power, centres equity, and builds cultures of care, accountability and collective liberation. I'm discovering that the deeper you dive into the principles and frameworks, the more theoretical it can sound, but it has real, practical meaning in day-to-day life.

I believe a feminist perspective brings an added dimension to the co-leadership model. When Clare and I became co-CEOs, we knew we wanted to lean into our shared power and accountability. We want to nurture courage, joy and creativity, while fostering a working environment that listens and remains curious. The first thing we did was meet with every colleague to ask their views.

Trust, honesty and a healthy dose of vulnerability are important principles too. If one of us is having a bad day, we'll share it. We want to build each other up, along with everyone else in the organisation. And, now more than ever, we want to emphasise zero tolerance for discrimination and harm. We're conscious that behaviours set the tone. Leaders shape organisational culture, for good or bad, intentionally or otherwise.

Backup, not burnout

During the course of one week, or even a day, CEOs will wear many hats and make dozens of difficult decisions. Clare and I work to keep each other honest, grounded and focused and we hope that shows. Collective and self-care are important to us. Clare and I check-in with each other daily,

but we rarely email or message each other outside of office hours. Whether it's holiday time or something else – time off means time off.

Burnout and stress in our sector are all too real. The 'worrying trend of CEOs quitting amid burnout fears', spotlighted by ACEVO and *Charity Times* in January, should give us all pause for thought. There's no ignoring the fact that the sector's gender pay gap remains high at over 10%, and leadership diversity isn't where it should be either – also highlighted by ACEVO.

There is evidence that co-leadership models are driving greater diversity. According to research conducted by the American non-profit Candid, 81% of co-led non-profits are led by at least one woman, and 43% have at least one BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) co-leader, compared to single-led organisations where 70% of CEOs are white. Encouraging data!

Sharing power is part of what we're learning to do. These past months we've been looking at how we can transfer decision-making powers to those who need it to – and be there with backup when needed. This also involves creating an environment where colleagues have greater understanding and control over resources. This has shaped our thinking on how we support managers and how they in turn support their direct reports.

It takes structure and process, and it won't happen all at once. We know we each have blind spots and areas for improvement. We won't be the perfect leaders (we should be wary of anyone who claims to be!) but we truly believe that feminist co-leadership can advance both equity goals and organisational effectiveness.

Many of us are now recognising that 'if you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading'. As we meet other charity leaders and share our approaches and experiences, we're coming to realise we're not the only ones who are excited about doing things a bit differently.



SARAH LOMAX,
CO-CEO, CHARITY
FINANCE GROUP

Are AI fears outrunning reality?

WRITTEN BY LAUREN WEYMOUTH

“The future of charity work isn’t human vs machine. It is human plus machine”

Artificial intelligence has arrived in the charity sector like a new volunteer who works at lightning speed and never asks for breaks. Unsurprisingly, this is making people really nervous. A recent survey found that four in five charity workers believe AI could replace them, and a similar proportion worry it has the potential to cause more harm than good.

The anxiety is understandable – after all, in a job market that is already challenging, adding competition in the form of a robot that can deliver administrative tasks at twice the speed without any complaints, is concerning. But fear, while human, isn’t the most helpful strategy.

The research reveals something important beneath the headline worry. Charity workers are not technophobic. In fact, respondents were more likely than other sectors to describe AI benefits in ‘people-centred terms,’ highlighting improved services, training and social responsibility rather than raw productivity. That instinct is the sector’s secret strength. It shows charity workers already understand what AI is best suited for: amplification, not substitution.

Yes, there are real labour market tremors. A study by Morgan Stanley reported that UK employers saw net job losses of 8% linked to AI in the past

year. Early career workers are especially uneasy, with four in five believing automation could replace them. These numbers shouldn’t be dismissed. Entry level administrative roles are particularly exposed, and the sector must plan for that disruption.

But replacement is only half the story. Throughout history, technology has consistently reshaped work rather than erasing it. The charity sector is built on relationships, empathy and trust – factors that are particularly resistant to full automation. AI can draft grant applications, sort donor data and summarise case notes in seconds. What it can’t do is sit with a grieving family, build trust with a marginalised community or navigate the delicate moral judgments that define frontline support.

The smarter conversation is not whether AI will change charity jobs, because, inevitably, it will. The real question is whether organisations shape that change deliberately. The Propel Tech study itself suggests successful adoption depends on transparent governance, ethical safeguards, workforce involvement and a commitment to augmentation rather than replacement. In other words, bring staff along for the journey instead of surprising them at the destination.

There are also signs that fear may be outrunning reality. Research



from Charity Job shows one in five candidates now believe AI is shrinking opportunities in the sector, up sharply from the previous year. Perception is moving faster than proven impact. That gap is important, because being overly cautious risks leaving charities under equipped while need continues to grow.

The charity sector has always adapted. It moved from paper files to databases, from street collections to digital fundraising, from local newsletters to global campaigns. AI is merely the next tool in that long evolution. Used wisely, it can free staff from repetitive tasks, surface insights from complex data and extend services to more people who need them.

The future of charity work isn’t human vs machine. It is human plus machine. And in a sector powered by compassion, the human part of that equation is not going anywhere.

PROFILE

KATE LEE

The new chief cheerleader

NCVO's new chief executive, Kate Lee, steps into the role with energy and intent: to celebrate the sector's impact, challenge its doom loop, and help it think bigger together.

When the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) announced Kate Lee as its new CEO, it described her arrival as a "crucial moment". Spend an hour in her company and you'll understand why. Lee combines the pragmatism of a leader who has steered major charities through crises with the relentless optimism of someone who believes civil society can change the world.

But, when Lee talks about leadership, she doesn't begin with strategies or boardroom war stories. She starts with the volunteers.

"The first people I ever managed, when I was 21 at the Red Cross, were volunteers," she recalls. "It's the absolute best way to cut your leadership teeth, learning how you motivate people who don't have to be there [...] it gives you skills for life." Those lessons still anchor her approach.

But Lee's route into the sector wasn't preordained. After studying public administration and politics, an NHS placement convinced her that the public sector wasn't a fit. A professor nudged her towards charities where she then took a role at St John Ambulance.

Since then, she's led organisations and held multiple board roles, ultimately shaping a leadership style rooted in co-design with service users. "Working with beneficiaries is humbling and inspiring, [...] it keeps you connected to the difference you're trying to make."

Culture before strategy



Across her CEO roles, Lee has navigated a pandemic, restructures and the rebuilding of internal trust. If there is one lesson she returns to repeatedly, it is the primacy of culture.

"It's a cliché, but culture eats strategy for breakfast," she says. "If people don't feel safe, happy or included; if honesty isn't the norm, however passionate they are, then it's a barrier. If you don't enjoy coming to work, it's hard to give your all."

She's frank about the role of herself in that system. "I was surprised at how visible the CEO is [...] and how much people's sense of safety depends on confidence in their leader. It's not just kindness and compassion; it's setting boundaries and role modelling what you want to see."

That role modelling includes radical transparency. "I'm a chronic oversharer," she jokes, "but it helps". "I've been open about my mental health, about being a working single mum. When leaders bring down barriers, others can speak openly too."



That openness and transparency means that recognition has followed Lee, including an OBE and industry awards, including twice being awarded *Charity Times*' CEO of the Year.

Lee is wary of "humble bragging", but just as wary of the reflex women often have to underplay their achievements. "We overplay empathy by stepping away from owning success. That doesn't help on terrible days when you're carrying the organisation's burdens. It's okay to say, 'I smashed it that day,'" she laughs, "and also: it's always a team effort."

Looking at her recognitions in that way means Lee has grown more comfortable in acknowledging what they represent. "My OBE nomination came from staff, volunteers and service users. That meant a lot. We shouldn't talk ourselves down, particularly as women leaders. Owning our successes matters."

Banding together

Arriving at NCVO, Lee assumed she knew the sector inside out - although she soon realised otherwise.

"I thought I knew it incredibly well," she laughs. "Then I saw this list of new members in January [...] from orchestras to zoos to animal welfare charities. It was a perfect snapshot of the brilliance and diversity of civil society. And I thought: there's so much I don't know."

Her early months have been defined by listening and by launching a major strategic

review to define NCVO's role for the next decade. At its heart is a desire to see the organisation reclaim what she calls its "activist roots".

"We should be the body that names and tackles the big system shifts no single charity can: protecting the right to protest, the shape of our regulation, how we relate to government. We need to sit in the centre, think for the sector, and act on what helps all of us."

She wants NCVO to be both a voice and a thinker for the sector: anticipating policy shifts, modelling the likely impact of government decisions and articulating alternatives.

"For example, we can say to the government: 'If a national insurance rise will cost the sector X in service delivery, we should be able to say that clearly [...] and also suggest better ways to achieve growth, like changes to gift aid.' It's a mindset shift. "NCVO should help the sector predict what's coming, not just survive the moment."

But Lee is under no illusions about the pressure many organisations face. "Charity chief execs are having a rough time," she says bluntly. "Funding constraints, workforce strain and public scrutiny have all left parts of the sector on their knees." But she also worries about the narrative of permanent crisis.

"If all we hear is 'charities are struggling', how do we attract brilliant talent? Why would a business choose to partner with us if we only talk about exhaustion?"

"We can't stop doom-looping, but we can't ignore the tough stuff either," she adds. "We need to make it easier for charities to engage with bigger opportunities, even when they're operating at the bone."

Collaboration, she argues, is no longer optional. With many organisations having already stripped back to core services, the next frontier lies in coalitions, shared infrastructure and new partnerships. "Where do you go next once you've cut everything? Band together."

One of the biggest opportunities to band together, she believes, is with the Civil Society Covenant. "I'm not just saying that because I chair the council," she adds, smiling.

The Covenant, she argues, signals a more constructive government civil society relationship than the sector has seen in years. That matters because "there are deep tensions, like local government procurement, causing real harm to relationships and services on the ground. They're solvable, if we use this window well."

Ultimately, her ambition is for NCVO to act as both convenor and chief cheerleader; honest about the challenges but relentless in highlighting innovation and impact. Campaigns such as Million Acts of Hope are part of that effort to shift tone without denying reality. "The response has been overwhelmingly positive," Lee says. "It's the sector I know and love... tired, yes, but still courageous, still activist at heart."

AI and ambition

One area where Lee sees tangible opportunity is artificial intelligence. While mindful of ethical risks and bias, she believes AI could help charities stop "reinventing the wheel." However, she is equally clear that ambition must be matched with accessibility.

"Some charities just need an introduction to how to do a proper AI search," she says. "NCVO has a role in that brilliant basics training."

Used well, AI can lead to game changing possibilities; from a shared repository of validated research the sector can search via AI, to de-jargonising internal documents, or mining aggregated member reports to spot emerging risks and opportunities, then asking organisations to validate those findings with a one-click survey. "We're a human centred sector," she says. "AI should make the human work easier, faster and clearer, not replace it."

That human touch threads through everything Lee does. For a leader who describes

herself as "wildly ambitious", Lee's grounding rituals are simple. She repeats a mantra: "I am a good person. I am trying my best." Rejecting imposter syndrome is also important: "It's almost rude to the people who appointed you to assume they misjudged you. People know what they want, so show them the honest version of yourself"

Lee has lived through periods of acute anxiety and personal upheaval, and still led effectively. "There were times outside work when I doubted myself. And I was still a brilliant chief exec. Sometimes you are the right leader but not in the right environment. You always hold choice in what you do next."

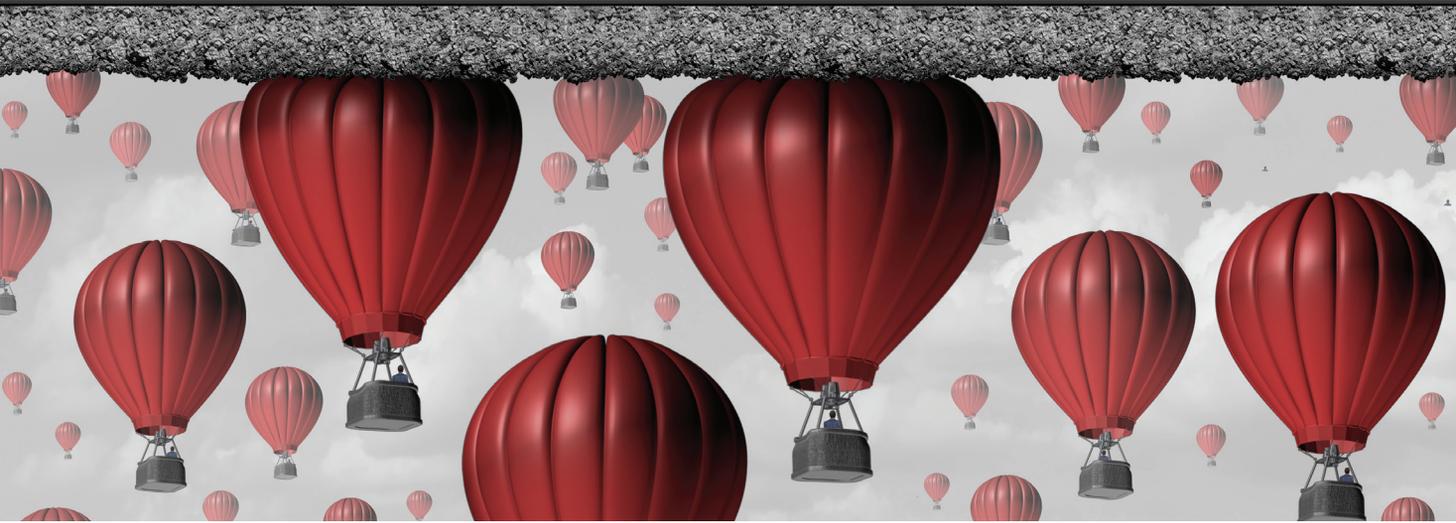
Two practical habits recur: saying thank you often, and cultivating the right networks. "Find your tribe," she says. "The network you build on a course is more valuable than the content you forget six months later. Today, those networks sustain the best leaders."

"Don't forget your power"

If Lee could tell her younger self one thing, it would be to enjoy impact more. "We helped 100,000 people, and I was thinking about the 800,000 we didn't. Yes, we should be ambitious. But we should also sit back and say: if we weren't here, none of those 100,000 would have been supported." But, above all, she wants leaders to remember why they came into the sector in the first place. "When you go to bed tonight, whatever's happened in your day, remember the world is slightly better because you were in it doing what you did."

For the NCVO's new CEO, that conviction is not naive optimism. It is a leadership strategy in its own right; one rooted in culture, collaboration and a refusal to let civil society forget its power.

NCVO's Million Acts of Hope kicks off activity in March, building towards a sector-wide moment in spring. Keep an eye on NCVO channels for more information.



Reaching the limit

WRITTEN BY **MELISSA MOODY**

Rising demand, fragile funding and governance pressures are creating conditions where exhaustion at the top is becoming normalised.

When the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) warned recently of a “worrying trend” of charity chief executives quitting their roles, it struck a nerve across the sector. Its annual report revealed rising demand for its CEO in Crisis service and the first recorded dip in membership for several years. It’s become clear since that behind the statistics lies a harder truth: too many charity leaders are running on empty.

Burnout in the charity sector is not new, but the combination of post-pandemic turbulence, prolonged austerity, rising demand and fragile funding has intensified the strain on those at the top. For boards and

trustees, the message from leaders who have lived it is clear: burnout is rarely an individual weakness. It is a systemic risk.

According to ACEVO’s latest findings, there was a 17.5% increase in charity leaders seeking out crisis support, with the organisation warning of a “worrying trend” of chief executives leaving the sector altogether.

In many ways, charity CEOs are uniquely predisposed to burnout, not because they’re less resilient, but because they care deeply.

“Burnout often happens when people are disconnected from a sense of purpose,” says Pauline Hughes, former charity director and founder of Gains Consultancy. “[In the charity

sector], the danger is that mission becomes the reason to accept the unacceptable. Purpose gets weaponised: ‘how can I complain when our beneficiaries have it worse?’”

Many leaders internalise that emotional contradiction. They feel responsible not just for their organisation, but for the survival and dignity of the people they serve. Felicia Willow, who has served as interim CEO seven times and permanent CEO once, describes the role as sitting “at the pressure point between staff and trustee expectations, while carrying extremely challenging responsibilities”.

“There’s an irony in the idea that charity work is the ‘soft option,’” she says. “I’ve had children’s lives depend

on me and the choices I made. Nothing about that is soft.”

This conflation of identity, purpose and responsibility shapes every aspect of the CEO role, from working patterns to emotional boundaries, and makes stepping back feel both morally wrong and organisationally dangerous.

Ultimately, charity CEOs straddle two fundamentally different functions: income generation and service delivery. In many sectors, purpose and revenue models align. In charities, they often conflict. Leaders are asked to meet growing need while being discouraged from investing in overheads, including leadership capacity.

For Willow, governance can amplify stress. Trustees, who may have little sector experience, are legally responsible for strategy and oversight. While many are outstanding, she argues that some boards underestimate the complexity of for-impact leadership. “Support means good governance, clear decisions and shared accountability, not just encouragement.”

For leaders of smaller charities, the pressures can be even more acute. Alex Richardson, founder and CEO of Keep Talking Services and a registered mental health nurse says that in three years, he has raised close to £300,000 and built a team of 200 volunteers making over 1,200 calls each month. But his title often disguises the reality. “Need funding? Speak to your fundraising team. Need policies reviewed? Speak to HR. But what if you are all the above?”

When everything rests on one pair of shoulders, risk escalates. “It can be incredibly lonely,” he says. “You can feel like you’re fighting these flames alone.”

Richardson has experienced burnout before. It led him to change jobs repeatedly, doubt his place in

mental health and even apply for warehouse roles simply to escape the emotional toll. “Burnout doesn’t happen overnight; it builds over time. And I believe the damage can be long-lasting.”

Founding his charity was, in part, a commitment to doing things differently. He now treats family time as non-negotiable and has introduced “trust hours” for staff, encouraging them to step away when overwhelmed and return once regulated. He also practices deliberate self-talk: “You are working as hard as you can, Alex, and that is all you can do.”

When burnout hits the top, it often doesn’t stay there. As Hughes articulates: “Burned-out leaders create burned-out cultures.”

When depleted, leaders may default to command-and-control behaviours, become risk-averse or tolerate toxic dynamics because they lack the energy to intervene. Innovation stalls; high performers leave quietly; and exhaustion becomes normalised.

Sara Jubb, wellbeing and leadership coach and wellbeing director at Plantfood Coaching has observed both low-energy and hyper-urgent manifestations. Some leaders withdraw and delay decisions; others become reactive and aggressive, narrowing tolerance for ambiguity. In both cases, psychological safety drops. “Teams often mirror the nervous system state of leadership,” she notes. “When a CEO is depleted or dysregulated, organisational energy is affected.”

The warning signs

Charity leaders often operate in high-stress environments for extended periods. That makes identifying the shift from stress to burnout critical, and difficult.

Hughes describes a distinctive pattern: “With high stress, leaders

are still performing. Then suddenly everything stops. It’s like a system shutdown - a cliff edge.”

For some, the body collapses in the form of chronic fatigue, persistent illness or an inability to focus. Others experience emotional overload, crying at their desk or freezing over routine decisions.

Jubb sees similar patterns in her clients. The signs she says include constant fatigue, even after rest, deteriorating decision-making, loss of perspective, emotional withdrawal or irritability, neglecting basic self-care and working longer but achieving less.

“These leaders are still functioning,” Jubb notes, “but their energy is no longer renewing. This is the critical window for intervention.”

However, because CEOs feel compelled to appear strong, many mask symptoms until collapse. “Admitting struggle still reads as weakness,” Hughes adds. Boards often misread the signs, too, with overwork being mistaken for dedication. Silence is interpreted as competence. “If you’re saying, ‘I don’t know how she keeps so many balls in the air,’ that should be a warning sign,” she says.

But prevention starts with clarity. All interviewees argue that trustees should regularly review the scope of the CEO role and ask whether it is realistic. Has the organisation’s ambition expanded without a corresponding increase in capacity? Are strategic priorities explicit, or does everything feel equally urgent? When everything is a priority, leaders are set up to fail.

Capacity conversations should also be normalised and separated from performance appraisals. When chairs ask about energy and bandwidth, not just outputs, they signal that sustainability matters. Psychological safety at the top grows when trustees model openness themselves,



acknowledging uncertainty or limits rather than projecting invulnerability at board level, leaders will keep suffering in silence.”

Building protective structures

It's clear that organisations that take burnout prevention seriously embed support into their structures rather than relying on leaders to seek help at crisis point.

Routine access to coaching or reflective supervision can provide a confidential space to process complexity and challenge unhelpful beliefs about responsibility. Peer networks offer something equally powerful: the reassurance that struggle is not unique. Willow describes CEO life as “notoriously lonely” and believes formal peer support should be far more common.

Planning for leadership cover is another protective measure. When all knowledge, relationships and authority sit with one individual, both burnout risk and organisational fragility increase. Succession planning and distributed leadership reduce that pressure. Boards can also examine the messages they send about overheads and investment. Chronic

underinvestment in leadership capacity sends a clear signal that endurance is expected. Sustainable organisations recognise that executive development and recovery time are not luxuries, but infrastructure.

For smaller charities, where resources are particularly tight, culture becomes even more critical. Richardson models the behaviour he knows his teams should copy. Along with ‘trust hours’, he also guards his family time as non-negotiable. These are practical boundaries that reinforce a wider message: contribution must align with capacity.

When warning signs are visible, early action matters. Encouraging a leader simply to “take a holiday” is rarely sufficient. Time off is essential, but recovery often requires deeper reflection on identity and beliefs.

Hughes speaks of the need to dismantle the assumption that worth equals output, or that the mission justifies personal damage. Without that shift, leaders risk returning to the same patterns with only temporary relief.

Jubb advises starting with physiological basics: sleep, nutrition, movement, while carving out protected thinking time. Leaders

approaching burnout often lose perspective; creating space to clarify what truly requires their attention can immediately reduce pressure.

Crucially, someone must create permission. Many CEOs will not ask for help until they are already depleted. Trustees and chairs who proactively offer support, rather than waiting for a request, can interrupt that trajectory.

Richardson emphasises awareness: “When the engine light comes on, don't ignore it,” he says. Naming what is happening with a trusted person can prevent escalation.

A shared responsibility

The narrative of the heroic, self-sacrificing charity leader is deeply embedded in the sector's culture. But martyrdom does not serve mission. Burned-out leaders make poorer decisions, struggle to hold complexity and inadvertently transmit anxiety through their organisations.

If the sector is serious about long-term impact, it must move beyond individual resilience tips and towards collective responsibility. Burnout prevention belongs in boardrooms as much as wellbeing strategies. It requires honest conversations about scope, investment, governance and culture.

The warning signs are often visible well before collapse: unrelenting fatigue, shrinking perspective, personality shifts, escalating urgency, withdrawal or reactivity. The question is whether organisations are willing to see them, and to act.

Sustainable leadership is not about pushing through at any cost. It is about designing roles and systems where leaders can remain energised, effective and human. In a climate of rising need and tightening resources, that may be one of the most strategic investments a charity can make.

Local roots, national reach

WRITTEN BY **CHERRY WELLS**

The Renewal Trust is a Nottingham-based charity nurturing happier, healthier, more connected communities. Its CEO, Cherry Wells, explains how partnerships are bringing national resources to local spaces while benefiting everyone involved.

We see many national organisations that want to make a difference locally, but struggle to reach people in a meaningful way. As a charity anchored in our local neighbourhoods of St Ann's and Sneinton, we're helping to bridge that gap. We have long-term, deep-rooted community relationships and an understanding of local cultures, barriers, and needs. Plus, the ability to adapt and flex quickly and provide a holistic, person-centred approach.

For example, we recently partnered with British Triathlon and British Cycling to launch community cycling and multisport programmes including beginner sessions and inclusive activities tailored to our neighbourhoods. The partnership is enabling us to deliver local sessions of national quality while training local people to build long-term capacity. In turn, it's helping British Triathlon and British Cycling to build genuine connections with local communities and break down barriers to access.

Beyond delivery, partnerships also give us the opportunity to influence national policy with local insight, real life stories and evidence of impact. We work closely with In Kind Direct and recently contributed to their national research report exploring hygiene poverty through the eyes of children and young people. Nic Williams, our Community Lead, presented to

Parliament and talked about the impact of hygiene poverty in Nottingham, including the 'hidden poverty' affecting working families struggling to make ends meet.

We prioritise partners who respect local knowledge, treat us as equals and want to make a genuine difference. National partners who are willing to change and adapt their programmes to meet the needs of local communities, and nurture long-term relationships rather than parachuting in support. For example, we're working with the National Literacy Trust to help families access reading resources through events and activities in a welcoming, inclusive, local setting.

Without local knowledge, communities can be seen through limited lenses and labelled as 'deprived', without recognising the depth of creativity, aspiration and confidence here. Working with national partners enables us to bring diverse opportunities of the highest quality to our neighbourhoods, and gives us a national platform to broaden perceptions and challenge negative stereotypes.

Alongside bringing investment and expertise into local places and spaces, working in partnership with national partners is also helping us respond to UK-wide challenges like health inequalities and the financial cost of living crisis – with solutions that work



for our communities. Everything we do is shaped by the people who live here.

As a trusted community delivery partner, we help the NHS reach people who may not engage with traditional service approaches, and support people with long-term health conditions. Similarly, we're helping Alzheimer's Society to connect with people who could benefit from early support including carers, by hosting and facilitating dementia-friendly activity and awareness sessions in our familiar community spaces.

Trust is imperative in both directions alongside clear communication and honesty about what works, and what doesn't. True partnerships take time, care and shared values but by combining our strengths, local charities and national organisations can reach those most in need and transform people's lives.

Q&A: How the MS Trust is responding to a changing landscape

QUESTIONS BY **MELISSA MOODY**

Lucy Taylor, CEO of the MS Trust, discusses the charity's new strategy and rebrand, shaped by the evolving needs of people living with MS.

What was the driving force behind creating the strategy and the rebrand for MS Trust?

Lucy Taylor: There were quite a few different reasons, but I'll keep them brief. I think the main driving force was the fact that the MS landscape is changing so much and it's continuing to change. It's changed so much since we last did a strategy. Treatments have changed, the diagnostic criteria have changed, [there's a new] 10-year plan for the NHS.

It was led by people living with MS and what their needs were and wanting to make sure that we have the biggest impact for them. We were an organisation that was founded on our information, and we continue to do that. We hear from people all over the world about the quality of our information, how important it is. But we're also aware that the way people consume information is changing. Everybody is different in terms of what they want and how they want to receive their information.

MS is a very complex condition. Everybody's experience of it is different. Some people want to read in detail [with a] huge amount of research. Others just want light touch or deeper information at different times. Some



people consume that digitally, others want print. We wanted to make sure that we could continue being there for people in the way that they wanted it. That was another important factor; accessibility, reaching a diverse range

of [people in the] MS community as we could. And we felt like that was something we needed to look at to make sure we were continuing to be relevant.

An important part was defining our

purpose as a charity. I think it's easy to keep thinking 'we want to do this' and 'we want to do that', but defining what we are here to do [is important] so that people with MS understand what we're here to do. It helps us in our decision making as well, because I think it's as easy to keep adding things, but you have to think, 'actually, we're not here to do that, isn't our core purpose'. The process of defining that helps us to have a greater impact.

The brand followed on from those decisions. And we're fortunate that we did them in tandem, the strategy was further along and we made some key decisions around the strategy that informed the rebrand. And that was about supporting the strategy... If people can't find us or it's not reaching the right people, it's not helpful.

How did you decide on the three strategic priorities?

Lucy: Once we did find our purpose, other things fell into place. Those things were areas that we already established credibility in and we knew we had impact. It was important to us to go back to our community and say, 'what do you need? What's important about what we do? What do you need going forward?' rather than just making up something.

We were aware that we couldn't do everything and there are things that people want us to do that are either outside of our remit or that we can't change. We can't fix the problems in the NHS, but we can make a difference and have an impact working with the NHS.

In terms of each of the three... everybody's different and we need to meet people and make sure we are actually supporting them in the way that they want. We are aware that the health system is complex and MS as

a condition is very complex. People talk to us a lot about the challenges of navigating those things. So we feel like we have to listen to that and play a role in helping people to navigate it.

The excellence, equity and consistency in treatment and care, [it's not about] just the excellence, which is important, but the equity and consistency. We know from all the stuff we hear that it's an enormous postcode lottery about the experience that they have, the care they have, the treatments they're able to access. We feel that shouldn't exist. There shouldn't be a huge diversity in how long it takes you to get treatment or how long it takes you to get a diagnosis or how long it takes you to get an MRI scan in different parts of the country. And so that equity and consistency is important for us. We have very strong relationships with the NHS and with health professionals and we feel we've got credibility in that space so we can influence and make a difference about that.

The final one about research and the bit about it being the things that matter. Again, it's about listening to people about what makes it difficult for them. That real experience is very important to us. The other part of that goal is about translating that into action. I hear all the time that there can be wonderful research going on, but it doesn't translate.. So making sure that we use our networks of health professionals, that we train and do professional development, that we translate some of that into action.

And as I say, they're all areas that we do already. I felt like it's focusing on where can we have an impact within these.

Before the strategy and rebrand, there was a merger. What lessons

from that can you share?

Lucy: It doesn't work if you just try and stick two organisations together. Ensuring that you have alignment in terms of your purpose and the impact that you want to make, right at the start is important.

We know that the MS community is pleased that we merged... They just want people to make a difference.

I would say to anybody considering it, there is real value in it. [But] it's not just about the operational detail and the complex legal detail. The culture change is important as well. Obviously, there's a lot of stuff around communication and listening. The difficulty, I would say, for anybody who's in that process or who's going through it or considering it, is often you're under legal or non-disclosure agreements. That communication can be difficult internally because not all your staff may know.

But between the two partners that are considering it, you keep talking and you keep adjusting and you keep listening. That's important.

The actual merger, there was so much detail to sort out that you don't always think about, aligning your bank systems and your data and your HR processes and all that operational detail. The actual merger part of it when it happened is just the start of it, that's when the conversations and the communications really start and you need to take everybody with you, keep talking and make that culture shift.

It takes probably a year to become a fully merged organisation from that point of merging. I think sometimes it's easy to forget that it's just the start of an ongoing process that has to continue.

Challenge accepted

WRITTEN BY LAUREN WEYMOUTH

A look at how challenge events are shaping the sector's next strategic battleground

On 23 March 2020, the UK entered its first national lockdown, sparked by a global pandemic that halted public life. Within a matter of days, the nation was confined to their homes, eagerly awaiting daily 5pm news updates.

But, as days went on, the updates were increasingly pessimistic. Planning became almost impossible and while many of those who could were forced to work from home, those that worked in face-to-face industries were left in limbo.

Among these were charities with fundraising events to run; mass-scale occasions that had no choice but to be postponed, reimagined or cancelled outright. Marathons were emptied, community fun runs disappeared from park calendars and trekking challenges were grounded. For a sector that had increasingly relied on collective physical endeavour as both an income stream and an engagement engine, the disruption was profound.

Mass participation fundraising, built on crowds, camaraderie and finish lines, faced an existential shock. Virtual events stepped in as an emergency substitute, but the absence of shared physical experience altered supporter motivation and momentum. Income dipped across the sector, pipelines stalled and charities were forced to rethink recruitment, stewardship and delivery models in real time.

Six years on, the landscape looks significantly different and participation

has returned with renewed energy. Latest sector reporting backs this up, suggesting that challenge-based events have not just recovered but have reasserted themselves as the primary drivers of voluntary income.

New data from online platform JustGiving underscores just how central challenge events have become to modern fundraising strategies. Its *Event Fundraising Snapshot 2026* found that 59% of charities view sporting and fitness events as their most valuable fundraising activity, with running firmly holding the top spot.

The report reveals the depth of sector reliance on these activities: 87% of charities say running is a core part of their events programme, and two thirds report it is their single most popular event type. More broadly, more than three quarters of charities now offer sporting and fitness events, far outstripping more traditional community formats such as bake sales (49%) and quiz nights (40%).

The financial returns remain substantial, too. In 2025 alone, £235 million was raised through organised sporting and fitness events via JustGiving, with running accounting for just under half of all fundraising event pages. The London Marathon continues to dominate the landscape, cited by 57% of charities as the most valuable multi-charity event.

Pascale Harvie, president and general manager at JustGiving, says the strategic importance of events

is now unmistakable. She explains that year after year charities are driving "remarkable impact through events" and that the research shows organisations that prioritise event fundraising strategically are most likely to exceed their targets and engage fundraisers. Harvie adds that challenge events such as running, walking, swimming and cycling can make a huge impact, particularly multi-charity moments like the London Marathon, and notes the platform has seen growth in donations tied to challenge participation over the past year, a trend it expects to continue.

However, the research also reveals a growing divide between charities that treat events as mission-critical and those that do not.

Among organisations that exceeded their fundraising targets, 71% said leadership teams view event fundraising as a strategic priority. Across the sector overall, leadership engagement is split evenly down the middle. Capacity remains another pinch point: only one in four charities believe they are sufficiently resourced to grow their events income.

This suggests the post-pandemic recovery phase is giving way to something more competitive, where internal alignment and investment discipline increasingly determine success.

The anatomy of a £3,000 fundraiser
If JustGiving's data explains why events

matter, new insight from Enthuse also sheds light on how top-performing participants maximise returns.

Its survey of 2,500 members of the public highlights the behaviours of the elite 17% of fundraisers who generate more than £3,000 per event. The findings point to a simple but often overlooked truth: the best fundraisers start early and communicate often.

Nearly a third of participants who begin fundraising six months before their event exceed the £3,000 mark, compared with just 13% of those who start one month out. Enthuse says this demonstrates the importance of an early start, noting that four in five donations arrive before the event itself, meaning charities should remind supporters there is no need to wait until the finish line to ask.

Social media intensity also correlates strongly with success. Two thirds of those raising more than £3,000 promoted their challenge online, compared with less than a quarter of those raising under £500. The most successful fundraisers typically use five different platforms, roughly double the channel mix of lower performers.

Crucially, authenticity appears

to convert. More than half of high-value fundraisers shared a personal connection to the cause on social media, significantly higher than lower-raising peers.

A growing market

While tactics matter, audience composition may shape the next phase of mass participation growth. Research from mass participation specialists Massive, based on more than 40,000 participants, suggests young women are becoming the dominant force among new entrants. Almost two thirds of people taking part for the first time in the past two years are female, with the skew even more pronounced in younger age groups.

Massive explains that events are successfully attracting young women at a higher rate than young men, pointing to a significant recruitment opportunity for charities. Yet the sector may not be fully capitalising. Currently, only one in 20 participants is recruited directly by charities, despite one in seven ultimately fundraising.

The report highlights a critical behavioural insight: for most supporters, the event comes first and

the charity second. "For the majority of fundraisers, the event or challenge is the starting point, not the charity," Massive explains. "This highlights the critical role events play for charities in recruiting and inspiring their fundraisers, adding, "the relationship between charities and event organisers continues to be a strong and mutually beneficial one with millions raised by event participants every year".

Social discovery is also shifting. Social media has risen from the third most important discovery channel three years ago to the single most influential today, with women 10% more likely than men to hear about events through these platforms.

Pressure points

Despite the broadly positive outlook, warning lights are beginning to flash across the events ecosystem. As charities scale up challenge programmes to drive income, new strains are emerging among both participants and the professionals delivering them.

Participants report spending an average of £189 to take part in events, and only just over a third believe



this represents good value. Financial pressure is now the top barrier for nearly one in three participants considering cutting back, while under-35s increasingly cite time constraints. For charities heavily reliant on participation growth, these signals suggest the ceiling for expansion may not be limitless.

At the workforce level, concerns are also mounting about the human cost of delivering ever more ambitious fundraising programmes. Research conducted last year by Irish fundraiser Michelle Reynolds points to what she describes as a “hidden trauma and burnout crisis” among fundraising professionals that has been “ignored for too long”.

According to her findings, fundraisers often feel they “can’t say no” to additional workload and can be affected by the perception that their own mental health struggles are minor compared with those experienced by beneficiaries and *frontline staff*.

The Rogare report, *Caring too much: The burnout dilemma faced by fundraisers, and the emotional toll of a fundraising career*, identifies four key drivers of stress and burnout among fundraisers. These include fundraisers’ inherent empathy, which can open the door to emotional strain; their tendency to prioritise others’ interests above their own; the pressure to achieve more with fewer resources; and the persistent idealisation that fundraisers should be able to deliver the impossible.

“Many fundraisers are so committed to their organisation’s mission that the intensity of work feels worth it. But this extra effort often comes at the expense of fundraisers’ mental health and wellbeing,” Reynolds says.

“Charities need to do more to support their fundraisers. While fundraisers often put themselves

forward to do more, it is impossible to ignore the concomitant cultural expectation and pressure from organisations and leadership that this is what fundraisers ought to do. Perhaps this has been overlooked for too long.

“Fundraisers need to be empowered and enabled to hold boundaries around workload, to find their individual comfort level around exposure to others’ traumatic experiences, and resist the self-imposed yet seemingly reinforced-by-others belief that they must be ‘always on’ and put everyone else’s needs ahead of their own.”

In a separate report, Rogare also warned that paying fundraisers commission based on donations can harm psychological wellbeing. Risks include making it harder for fundraisers to resist inappropriate donor behaviour, creating workplace division around targets, and contributing to burnout where income becomes unpredictable.

The think tank recommends that commissions should never be the sole form of remuneration and should always sit within a broader pay structure. It also argues that commission should not be used for salaried charity fundraising staff and, where used with agency or freelance fundraisers, must include safeguards to protect wellbeing.

“If charities cannot put these safeguards in place – especially to exercise their duty of care to protect the psychological wellbeing of their fundraisers – then they should not be using commission as part of their remuneration packages, irrespective of whether the relevant code of practice permits it,” the report states.

Report co-author Heather Hill notes that conversations around commission-based pay are “long overdue” and says

the paper is intended to “jumpstart critical thinking around the issue”. She adds that Rogare is “neither arguing for nor against commission-based pay for fundraisers, only evaluating the ethical arguments”.

A sustainable machine

Taken together, the latest wave of research paints a picture of a fundraising model that has survived its biggest stress test in decades and emerged broadly intact. Challenge events remain the sector’s most reliable voluntary income engine, and participation appetite heading into 2026 appears strong, with almost nine in ten people planning to maintain or increase their involvement.

But the ground is shifting under charities’ feet. Digital-first supporter journeys, rising participant costs, capacity constraints and workforce wellbeing concerns are reshaping what successful event fundraising looks like. The same model that is driving income growth is also demanding more sophisticated stewardship and, increasingly, more careful attention to the people delivering it.

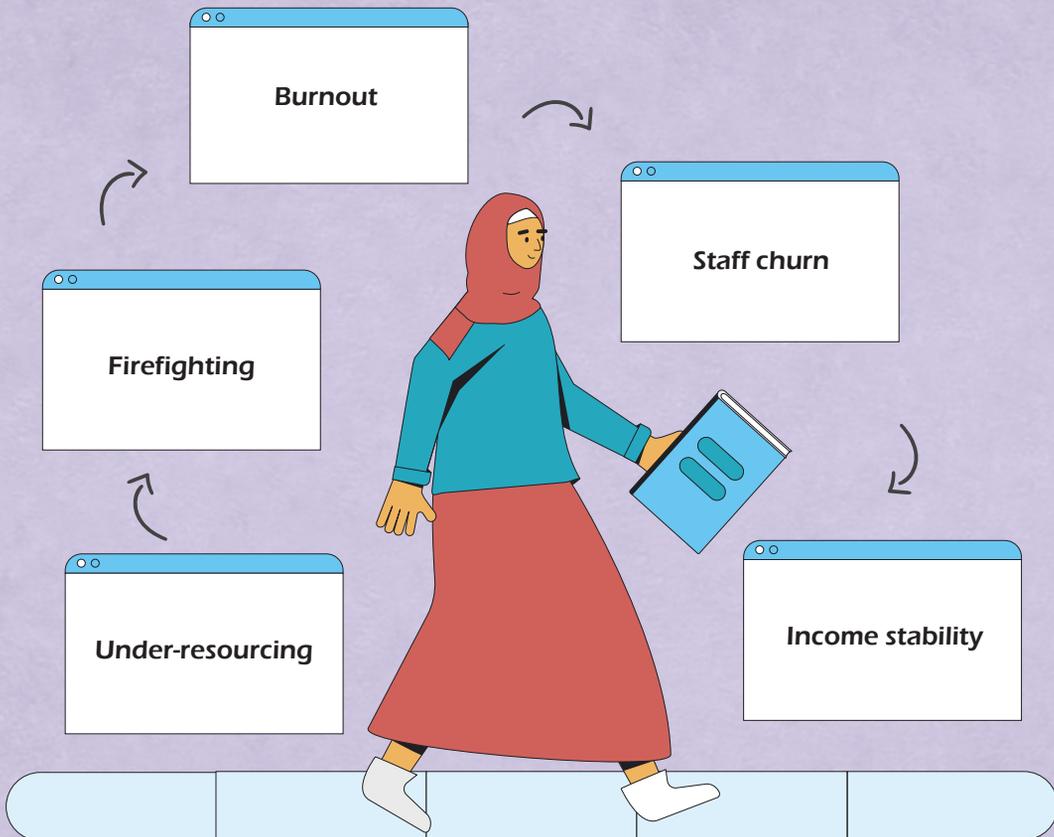
For many charities, the opportunity is still enormous. The mass appeal of running bibs, finish-line photos and peer-to-peer storytelling continues to pull new supporters into the sector’s orbit. Yet the emerging data suggests future success will depend on how sustainably programmes are built behind the scenes.

The pandemic may have paused the mass participation machine. What the 2026 data shows is that it has restarted at full speed, but it is now running on a more complex track, one where long-term growth will depend not just on the stamina of participants, but on the resilience of the fundraising teams keeping the whole system moving.

charitytimes

REPORT

Rethinking corporate partnerships



Based on findings from *Corporate Fundraising in 2026: The Reality Behind the Partnerships*, this analysis explores the leadership decisions shaping the future of corporate partnerships in the charity sector

Rethinking corporate partnerships

BY MELISSA MOODY, BASED ON RESEARCH BY RACHEL HOLBOROW

Based on findings from *Corporate Fundraising in 2026: The Reality Behind the Partnerships*, this analysis explores the leadership decisions shaping the future of corporate partnerships in the charity sector.

Corporate partnerships promise long-term value for charities, yet the reality inside many fundraising teams is strained. In *Corporate Fundraising in 2026: The Reality Behind the Partnerships*, research captures insight from more than 140 fundraisers, revealing a sector grappling with burnout, under-resourcing and gaps between ambition and capacity. Melissa Moody draws on findings from Rachel Holborow's research to explore the leadership decisions shaping the future of corporate partnerships, highlighting where organisational culture is blocking progress, where opportunities are being missed and what is needed to build stronger partnerships.

AT A GLANCE



- **79%** of organisations say corporate fundraising “is still starting or growing”
- **19%** say they have a well-established or high-performing programme
- **61%** say corporate income is under **10%** of total income
- **9%** Feel their organisation fully champions corporate partnerships

When looking at the overarching results, corporate fundraising remains full of potential but far from maturity. It appears as though most organisations are still in growth stages with only a minority running well-established programmes. The findings reveal a channel expected to deliver, but without the backing, integration or investment needed to thrive.

THE PRESSURE POINTS

Challenges in corporate fundraising

Lack of time/capacity – 68%

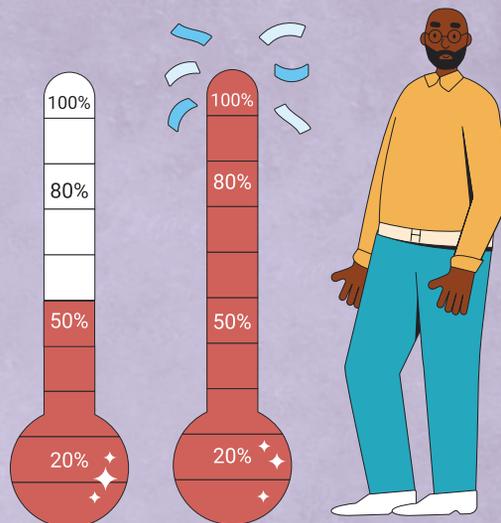
Short-term partnerships – 58%

Burnout – 54%

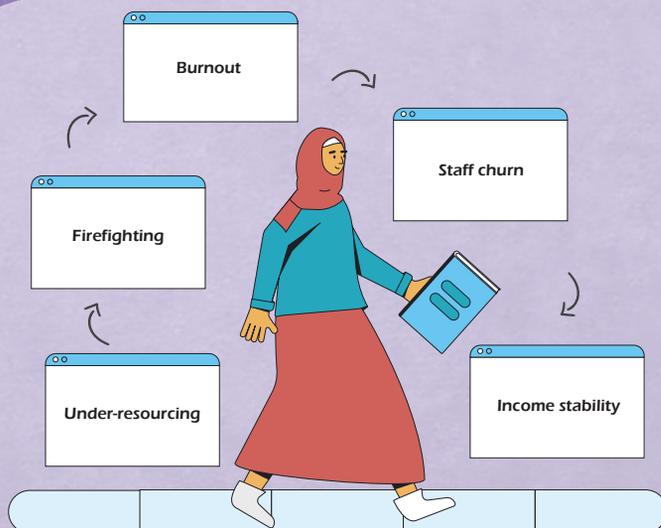
Evidencing impact – 48%

Internal silos – 41%

Chronic capacity shortages leave teams firefighting instead of building meaningful partnerships, while short-term expectations undermine long-term value. Burnout is widespread as fundraisers juggle delivery, reporting and pitching without adequate support. Weak impact data and internal silos further stall progress, creating a system where ambition outstrips the operational reality.



THE HIDDEN COST OF BURNOUT



Many teams are caught in a destructive cycle that compounds pressure at every turn. When charities under-resource corporate fundraising, staff are pushed into permanent firefighting mode, leaving no room for strategic planning, relationship building or quality stewardship. Over time, the relentless pace leads to burnout, driving skilled fundraisers to leave, taking corporate knowledge, trust and momentum with them.

As these relationships weaken or collapse, income becomes increasingly unpredictable, creating further pressure to do more with less.

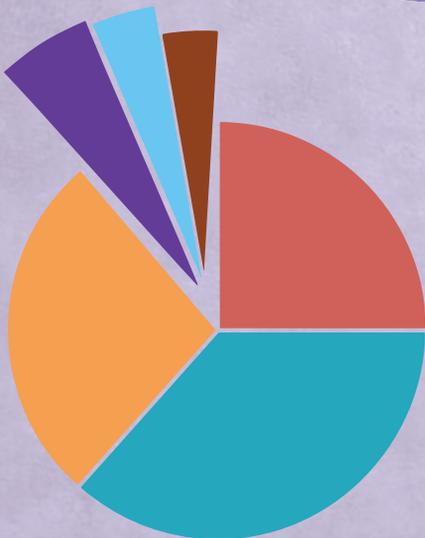
This then reinforces the very conditions that triggered the cycle in the first place.

A SPLIT WORKFORCE

32% have 10+ years of experience
39% have under 3 years

Corporate fundraising teams span two different worlds: a seasoned cohort with over a decade of experience, and a rapidly growing group with fewer than three years in post.

This imbalance creates both vulnerability and opportunity; deep expertise sits alongside high turnover risk, while newer fundraisers often lack the organisational support and clarity needed to develop. For leaders, retaining experience while nurturing early-career talent is now a strategic imperative.



How much does your organisation understand and value corporate partnerships?

- **Very limited**
- **Seen as "just fundraising"**
- **Some awareness**
- **Fully understands**
- **Other**
- **Not sure**

Just 9% of respondents feel their charity truly champions corporate partnerships; the majority sit in the middle with 43% reporting partial awareness and 30% saying it's viewed as 'just fundraising'. A further 16% describe the understanding as 'very limited'.

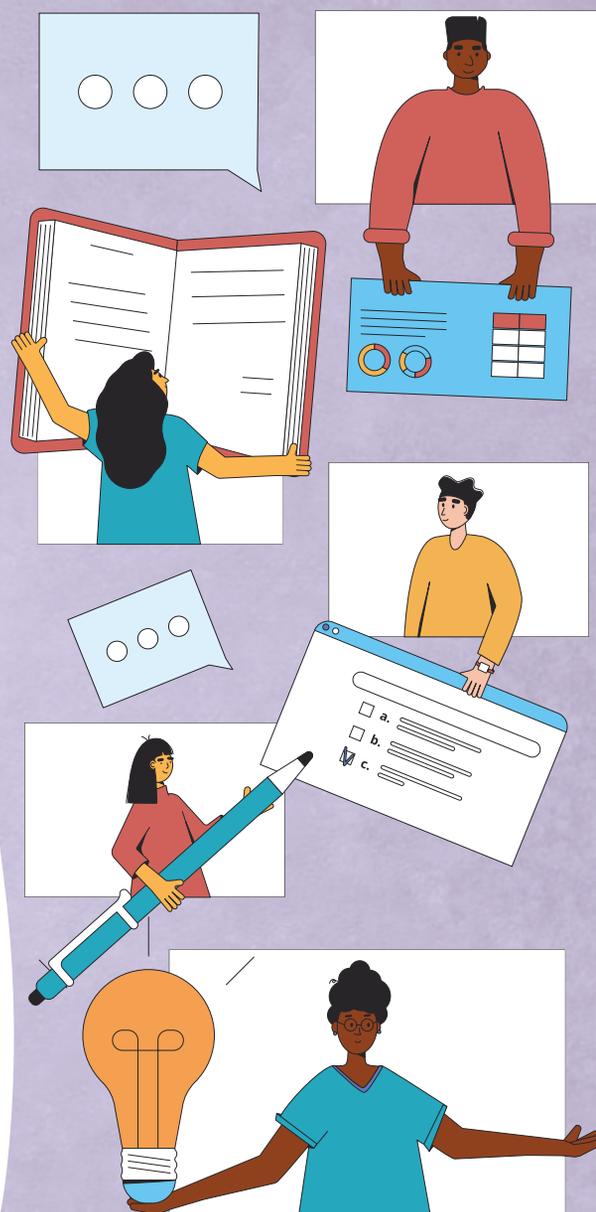
OPPORTUNITIES

What do you see as the biggest opportunities in corporate fundraising?

- 77%** Building strategic long-term partnerships
- 64%** Embedding partnerships into service delivery
- 58%** Becoming a strategic voice internally
- 57%** Social impact reporting
- 56%** Seeing partnerships drive real-world impact
- 41%** Collaborative approaches
- 39%** Skills-based volunteering
- 39%** Rising use of digital tools
- 36%** Engaging non-traditional sectors with charity sector more

Amid the pressures, the research highlights an optimistic through-line: substantial opportunities exist, but most require decisive leadership support. The area of greatest potential is in building long-term, strategic partnerships, reflecting a desire to move beyond transactional, one-year cycles.

A further 64% see major value in embedding partnerships into service delivery, signalling appetite for deeper organisational collaboration rather than isolated fundraising initiatives. Fundraisers also believe they could hold far more strategic influence internally, especially if equipped with stronger social impact reporting capabilities. Additional opportunities lie in demonstrating real-world impact, adopting collaborative or cross-charity approaches, expanding skills-based volunteering, and leveraging digital tools. Even non-traditional sectors are seen as promising, indicating broad space for innovation. For leaders, the message is clear: the opportunity is real, but it must be enabled.



What unlocks progress?

- Clarity** What needs funding, at what cost, with what outcomes
- Capacity** Targets aligned to people, time and tools
- Courage** Saying no to poor-fit opportunities

For charity leaders, the path to stronger corporate partnerships rests on three interconnected disciplines. Clarity means giving fundraisers a firm foundation: knowing exactly what needs funding, what it costs and the outcomes it will deliver. Capacity ensures ambitions match reality, with targets aligned to the people, time and tools available. And courage provides strategic discipline, the willingness to say no to poor-fit opportunities that drain resources or undermine mission. Together, these principles create the conditions for sustainable, high-value corporate fundraising.



CONCLUSION

Corporate fundraising remains one of the charity sector's most promising yet under-realised opportunities. The research makes clear that leadership, more than anything else, determines whether that potential is unlocked or lost. What emerges across the findings is not a lack of ambition or talent, but a mismatch between expectations and the conditions charities create for partnership work to thrive. Fundraisers are navigating chronic under-resourcing, structural short-termism and growing pressure to deliver quick wins in an environment built for endurance. Without leadership intervention, the cycle of firefighting, burnout and churn continues, weakening the very relationships organisations rely on to grow income and influence.

Yet the opportunities identified in the study are equally leadership-driven. Long-term strategic partnerships, deeper integration with service delivery, stronger impact reporting and more innovative, values-aligned collaboration all require organisational commitment. Leaders shape the culture that decides whether corporate partnerships are truly championed or merely tolerated; whether fundraisers have access to programme teams, data and senior stewardship; whether boundaries are respected or sacrificed under pressure.

Ultimately, the path forward rests on three leadership disciplines: clarity about what needs funding and why; capacity that matches ambition with the right people, time and tools; and courage to prioritise fit over volume and say no to opportunities that undermine mission or wellbeing. When leaders set these conditions, corporate fundraising stops being a fragile, high-pressure hope and becomes a strategic, sustainable engine for impact.

Rachel Holborow is a corporate fundraising consultant and founder of Rachel H Consulting. The full report, Corporate Fundraising in 2026: The Reality Behind the Partnerships, sponsored by Fireside Fundraising, is available at <https://rachelhconsulting.com/research-report/>

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LEADERSHIP DIARY: From open-top buses to boardrooms

“I enjoy tracking how our volunteer recruitment, referrals, and matches are shifting”



Louise Johns-Shepherd shares a week in her life as Chief Executive of The Kids Network, the London charity supporting children aged 8-11 through one-to-one mentoring to help them to build confidence, resilience, and meaningful community connections.

Before joining TKN, Louise led the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education and worked as a London headteacher and teacher, which continues to shape her child-centred, mission-driven approach to leadership. This diary offers a snapshot of how she balances strategy, partnerships and fundraising with the moments of connection that sit at the heart of the charity's impact.

SUNDAY

I started my week in an unusual but joyful way: on a group mentoring trip with our mentors and mentees, gifted by our wonderful partner Big Bus

LOUISE JOHNS-SHEPHERD, CEO OF THE KIDS NETWORK, CHRONICLES A WEEK THAT CAPTURES THE FULL SPECTRUM OF CHARITY LEADERSHIP.

Tours. An open-top bus tour of London's sights feels like a rare treat for most Londoners, but seeing the city through the eyes of our children is something else entirely. I've lived most of my life in London and joined The Kids Network because I wanted to be part of an organisation that truly changed the future of London's children. On the bus tour, I witnessed this in such a tangible way - meeting our mentors, mentees and seeing their relationships forming and flourishing. One pair had chosen this as their final meeting after a full year together, and it was a privilege to share that closing chapter with them.

MONDAY

I began the official work week looking at our dashboards, and while that might not sound incredibly thrilling, I enjoy tracking how our volunteer recruitment, referrals, and matches are shifting. It gives me a real-time sense of how many children we're reaching and how quickly. With plans to scale our work, this data is absolutely key and underpins my fortnightly catch up with our Chair of Trustees. In better understanding how the organisation is working and moving forward, together, we use it to maximise impact and set the right tone for a year of ambition, growth and clarity ahead.

Then it's over to our Fundraising Lead who is in the middle of a brilliant four-week campaign, supporting volunteers to complete runs, encouraging employer donations, and championing our work across London. Fundraising is the petrol that keeps our engine running, but it's also so much more. It's a powerful expression of how deeply people care about

helping us reach more children. We often say it takes a city to raise a child, and this campaign is proof that people really do step up.

TUESDAY

The day begins with our Schools Partnership Lead as we discuss expansion and new school relationships. With a background in education, I know first-hand the pressures that schools are under. It's always a balancing act: ensuring we have enough mentors in the right communities so children can be matched quickly, and identifying where we can be most supportive and effective.

In the afternoon, it's my weekly catch-up with our Managing Director. The pace at which we move is incredible, and our MD is the person who keeps the entire operation running. Systems and processes are so important, keeping everyone safe and accountable. I couldn't do what I do without her.

WEDNESDAY

Midweek, I carve out protected time for deeper thinking: writing pitches to new funders, shaping next year's business plan, and planning how we can maximise our impact.

In the evening, I switch hats and head to a board meeting for Brixton House - a theatre where I'm a trustee. It might sound like a busman's holiday, but I think being part of a completely different type of organisation sharpens my strategic thinking and gives me a fresh perspective for my work at The Kids Network.

THURSDAY

Our monthly team day is always something special. Our teams are usually out and about, so gathering everyone together in one place is rare. Three times a year we use this day to walk through everything that's happened across the charity over the previous four months.

It's a chance for us all to hear about the breadth of our work, with case studies shared by each Programme Manager reminding us why we're

here and ensuring children's voices and opinions remain firmly at the centre of everything we do. It's also a time for us to connect with one another, and have fun, especially as our Comms Officer is putting together content for our TikTok so we spend a lot of time laughing (they are very patient!).

I end the day at an event hosted by one of our funders - a lovely opportunity to reconnect with colleagues across the sector and catch up with both new and familiar faces.

FRIDAY

I work compressed hours which often leaves my Fridays free for other things, like my work in theatre and as part of the UK board of the Dollywood Foundation and Oscar's Book Prize. This week, I recorded a podcast about the importance of reading in prisons and finished a children's book review.

I then organise my diary and carve out time for next week's priorities, as well as having a peek at socials so I don't miss out on any of our heart warming and life changing stories!

Got a diary to share

If you're a charity leader – CEO, COO, chair, trustee or department head – and would like to document a typical work day, week, or project, please get in touch with Charity Times' deputy editor at: melissa.moody@charitytimes.com

Making lived experience count in charity leadership

WRITTEN BY ROSIE PHILLIPS

Rosie Phillips, CEO of Developing Health & Independence, challenges charities to move beyond symbolic involvement by creating cultures that trust, empower and learn from people with lived experience.

The story of Jeremy Palmer, a former client of Developing Health & Independence (DHI), recently went viral. Jeremy is now our supported housing team leader, running the service he once relied on.

The story resonated because it shows that change is possible and because of its powerful twist.

Across the sector, 'lived experience' has become a familiar term. Yet too often it is symbolic. People are invited to share their stories, but rarely empowered to shape decisions or influence where power sits.

Moving beyond tokenism requires resources, transparency, trust and a willingness to tolerate some risk. Crucially, it must be driven from the very top. Without visible leadership commitment, lived experience becomes an add-on rather than a core principle.

I do not have lived experience of the services DHI provides. That reality has shaped my approach. Rather than trying to speak for people, I have been intentional about ensuring lived experience sits around me through governance, leadership and organisational culture.

Lived experience is perhaps in DHI's DNA. Our organisational roots lie in Bath Self-Help housing association, which was founded on the principles of mutual

aid and collective action. The model was grounded in the direct experience of people excluded from conventional housing systems.

At DHI, our values explicitly support meaningful involvement from people with lived experience: Self Direction, Zest for Life and Stimulation. These are not just aspirational words on a wall.

For me, stimulation is especially relevant. Fundamentally, it is about learning. Learning requires challenge, reflection – and sometimes mistakes. We are told we learn from failure, yet in the public and charity sectors there is little tolerance for it.

A step in moving beyond tokenism is therefore cultural. Rather than removing all risk from lived experience involvement, we need environments where mistakes are accepted and learning is expected. This starts with clear expectations and boundaries, but once these are in place, organisations must trust people to take ownership. This is not an argument for recklessness. Safeguarding remains essential, but it should enable participation, not shut it down. When fear of risk dominates, it reinforces the power imbalances we claim to challenge.

I recently sat down with our peers – service users with lived experience who are trained and supported to help

our clients – to ask what works. Trust, training and DHI's non-hierarchical culture were key.

"For example, we know weekends can be trigger points for relapse, so we were empowered to set up a Prep for the Weekend group which runs every Friday," said one peer.

Responding to feedback creates a virtuous circle of trust, building confidence and helping us improve.

Lived experience is represented on our board – but we don't rely on these trustees to speak for all service users; instead, assurance that we have listened widely comes through our User Voices group, which is open to all service users and peers and reports directly to the board. Its purpose is to hear the widest possible range of experiences and ensure that insight shapes service development and decision-making.

None of this has happened by accident. We have invested in lived experience leadership, supported by trust funders and by embedding peer involvement into service tenders.

This investment reflects a belief that lived experience is not an optional extra or a reputational asset. When embedded properly it strengthens accountability, improves outcomes and makes charities better at the services they exist to provide.

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A sector in waiting

WRITTEN BY MELISSA MOODY

In a sector facing coordinated pressure and contested interpretations, trustees are being urged to document decisions, protect staff and stay true to charitable purpose

When the UK Supreme Court handed down its judgment in April 2025, ruling that for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010 the terms “sex”, “man” and “woman” refer to biological sex, few anticipated how swiftly the implications would land on charity boards’ desks.

Nearly a year on, the sector is still operating in a state of managed uncertainty. The statutory Code of Practice from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has yet to be finalised and the Charity Commission has written to ministers urging clarity. Meanwhile, membership organisations including Girlguiding and the Women’s Institute have altered

policies under threat of legal action.

For charity leaders, the question is no longer what the judgment says, it is how to govern responsibly while the guidance catches up.

Regulatory reality

While the Court stressed that the ruling “must not be seen as a triumph of one group at the expense of another” and that protections for trans people against discrimination remain intact, sector leaders report widespread confusion, heightened organisational risk, and intensified external pressure.

The clearest formal steer to organisations has come from the Charity Commission in January 2026. In response to governance consultant Penny Wilson, chief executive David Holdsworth confirmed in an open letter: “It can be a reasonable decision for trustees to await the final statutory guidance, or alternatively to seek legal advice relevant to their charity’s position and make changes as they consider necessary.” In other words, boards, and therefore charities, are not required to rush into decisions.

When talking about what steps charities should take, Wilson tells charities to “sit tight”. “The Charity Commission has said that you don’t need to make any changes until the EHRC final guidance has been issued,” she explains.

What it really means is that trustees’ duties remain unchanged. They must act in good faith, pursue their charitable purposes, and make decisions in the charity’s best interests. Acting precipitously, whether to exclude trans beneficiaries or to double down on inclusion without assessing legal risk, could expose charities to challenge on governance grounds.

Kevin Taylor-McKnight, founder of Third Sector Against Transphobia (TSAT), also warns organisations against reactive decision-making. “Good governance is not about reacting to external noise, it’s about acting in the best interests of your stakeholders based on firm evidence,” Taylor-McKnight says. “Good governance requires a steady approach, not a speedy one, and an approach that is informed by expert and balanced legal advice.”

Operational impact

While the judgment addressed statutory interpretation, its practical effects are being felt most acutely in service delivery and workplace management.

Alex Matheson, director of inclusion at the LGBT Foundation, describes the aftermath as “a difficult and unexpected blow”. The subsequent lack of clear guidance, she says, has left organisations “wondering what this means for their services (particularly if gender based), bathrooms and changing facilities.”

The complexity also differs depending on context. For service providers, current case law affirms that charities are not required to provide single-sex services, though they may choose to where objectively justified. Any exclusion of trans people must meet a proportionality test and be necessary and evidence-based.

For workplaces, employers must provide single-sex toilet and washing facilities for staff. However, the ruling does not require all facilities to be exclusionary; mixed or gender-neutral options may sit alongside single-sex provision.

Matheson stresses that any exclusion must be documented and justified. “Any decision a charity makes will need to be able to show ‘proportionate’ decision making, ensuring dignity, and inclusion-based practices which respect and uphold the rights of all.”

Even more so, one of the most complex governance questions organisations are facing concerns charitable objects.

Some charities with single-sex objects are awaiting EHRC guidance to determine whether they can continue serving trans beneficiaries without amending their governing documents. Under the Charities Act 2022, any change must pass the “similarity test”, requiring new purposes to be similar to the original.

Wilson anticipates that, depending on final guidance, “many boards will wish to explore amending their objects to ensure inclusion.” But this requires

Commission approval and careful navigation of CC36 guidance on governing document changes.

The decision to amend objects is strategic, not merely operational. It signals long-term positioning on inclusion, beneficiary scope and risk appetite.

Dealing with external pressures

Beyond legal complexity, many leaders report coordinated external campaigns.

Taylor-McKnight says he is seeing “coordinated external pressure from trans-hostile organisations and their followers.” TSAT, founded in December 2025, has grown to more than 400 sector professionals and senior leaders. Its purpose, he says, is to ensure charities are not “totally blindsided by vexatious attacks” and can make “calm, lawful, evidence-based decisions rooted in their charitable purpose.”

An anonymous trans charity CEO describes the impact more starkly: “It took the increasing lawfare threat to force changes from a couple of high-profile charities before the dynamic started to change [...] This growing group is hearing some tragic tales of external actors, even including

charities, trying to force charities to make changes they don’t want to make, and that are contrary to their charitable purpose and mission.”

With these threats, boards are not having to just interpret a judgment, they are also assessing legal risks of discrimination claims, financial risk from threatened litigation, reputational risk from either





perceived exclusion or inclusion and mission drift if policy changes are driven by external pressure rather than charitable purpose.

As Taylor-McKnight notes: “The loudest voice in the room is not necessarily the one you are legally

obliged to serve [...] The anchor here is ‘what best advances our charitable purpose and protects our beneficiaries?’”

Internal impact

For many charities, the most immediate impact is internal. Matheson explains that “poorly communicated or overly rigid interpretations can have a ‘devastating impact’ on trans and intersex people’s lives.” Matheson advises leaders to hold spaces for discussion, survey colleagues, and reassure staff that decisions will align with values and legal compliance.

The anonymous CEO articulates the human toll: “Can you imagine what

it feels like to have the government, judiciary and media celebrating the removal of your rights [...] I am just trying to get on and deliver our charitable purpose and deliver social good.”

Maintaining psychological safety, leaders argue, is not about validating all views equally but about upholding behavioural standards and legal duties.

Taylor-McKnight explains: “The goal isn’t to create a space where all views are equally validated; it’s to create a space where everyone is safe, respected, and able to work without fear, while the organisation still upholds its values, and its legal duties.”

Leaders are being urged to reaffirm organisational values, set clear behavioural expectations, address harassment consistently and avoid breaches of confidentiality, particularly the risk of outing trans staff.

A sector in waiting

Ultimately, until the EHRC publishes its final Code of Practice, uncertainty will persist. The Charity Commission has signalled that awaiting guidance is reasonable but legal challenges continue and external pressure has not abated. For now, charity leadership in this space is defined less by definitive answers and more by disciplined governance.

While waiting for guidance, charities should clarify charitable purpose, assess proportionality and risk, document decisions, communicate transparently, protect staff and beneficiaries and seek expert advice where needed.

In the meantime, charity leaders must do what they have always done in contested terrain: hold the line on purpose, protect those they serve, and govern with steadiness in the face of noise.

Lessons from my first year in the charity sector

WRITTEN BY MAHNOOR KHAN

Mahnoor Khan reflects on how curiosity, cultural awareness and lived experience helped shape her first year working in emotional health impact and research.

Studying sociology at university taught me how systems shape people's lives. It didn't prepare me for how abstract everything still felt when I started working at The Centre for Emotional Health, a charity supporting emotionally healthy lives.

Part of that disconnect came from growing up in a context where struggles were understood through endurance and patience rather than emotional expression. As a result, I moved through life not knowing that I didn't have to suppress my feelings.

So, the idea of joining an organisation focused on helping people nurture their emotional health felt daunting. I wondered if I could even do the job at all. Did I even understand what emotional health was? These questions were compounded by a steady undercurrent of impostor syndrome.

In my first week, I asked my colleagues for one piece of advice. Everyone said: always ask questions, even when you aren't entirely sure what you are asking. I've since realised that asking questions underpins all our work. Emotional health is not the absence of difficulties, but the presence of skills like empathy and self-awareness that help people navigate difficult situations. Understanding emotional health requires asking

questions like: What am I feeling? What might the other person be feeling? How might this affect my thoughts and behaviour? Such questions are a necessary part of understanding the charity's mission.

I work in the impact and research team, evaluating changes in parenting confidence and emotional health. This work has made me increasingly curious about the stories behind our data, and how change comes about for families.

One story that has stayed with me involved a couple new to the UK who were struggling in their relationship with their child. Through one of our programmes, they began realising how praise had been absent from their own childhoods, shaping the way they parented. As they slowly tried to affirm their child, they felt closer as a family. Hearing their experience prompted me to reflect on my own, and how much of what we struggle to offer others reflects what we weren't given. This capacity to see people's different circumstances with empathy is the crux of our work, and I'm learning how to better cultivate that within myself.

Our organisational culture embodies the same principles we encourage in families; healthy relationship skills in everyday conversations, a shared willingness to offer help, and a sense of playfulness. This culture of connection

has given me the safety and confidence to take on things that once felt beyond my comfort zone.

I saw this most clearly when I presented at a conference for early years practitioners. I spoke, somewhat nervously, about the unique impact on parents taking part in our Islamic values programme, and the importance of culturally appropriate framing. As a Muslim woman, I have seen how communities like mine can be labelled 'hard to reach' when services haven't been shaped with their cultural context in mind. It took me standing in that space to realise that inclusivity in emotional health research is something I want to keep exploring, and that my perspective is not separate from my professional role, but part of what I bring to it. Moments like these have been intimidating at times, but they have also been grounding. I'm still finding my own voice, but learning to be comfortably curious and to admit when something is unclear has tremendously shaped how I learn and contribute. I know I'll carry this curiosity into whatever comes next.

For others, especially those who feel unsure or out of place, I hope this reassures you that not knowing is not something you should be worried about. It can actually be the best place to begin.

Diversified Property Fund for Charities: A decade of outperformance

WRITTEN BY PAUL HODGSON, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF ESKMUIR AND FUND MANAGER OF THE DIVERSIFIED PROPERTY FUND FOR CHARITIES

Eskmuir's Diversified Property Fund for Charities marks its first decade with a track record of resilient income, active management and strong long-term returns.



In 2015 Eskmuir launched The Diversified Property Fund for Charities (DPFC). It was the philanthropic wish of the Laing Family, whose Trusts and Foundations own Eskmuir, to offer other charities the opportunity to benefit from the attractive returns the Eskmuir management team has consistently delivered to their charitable foundations over many years.

DPFC was launched as a tax efficient investment trust for charities wishing to access an actively managed diversified commercial property portfolio delivering a sustainable and reoccurring income alongside real capital growth.

In the 10 years since launch, DPFC is proud to have delivered a total return for investors of c. 128%. This has been achieved through building a UK-wide

commercial portfolio comprising industrial, office and retail warehouse multi-let properties, in supply constrained locations where there are strong prospects for economic growth and known occupier demand.

As a result, and through Eskmuir's proactive asset management, DPFC has delivered total returns averaging 9.6% per annum over the past 10 years, outperforming the MSCI / AREF benchmark over the last 1, 3, 5 & 10 years. DPFC is the best performing charities fund and second best performing fund in the benchmark for the 12 months to December 2025. Over the longer term, DPFC has been the best performing fund in the benchmark over the last 3 and 5 years and second best performing over 10 years.

Over the medium to long term, commercial real estate, as an asset class, has generated attractive returns by comparison to gilts and equities, offering strong income and capital growth with diversity and lower volatility. The fund offers charity investors access to real estate's positive investment characteristics whilst removing the barriers of direct investment.

Investors in DPFC cover a broad

spectrum of charitable purposes and include Oxbridge colleges, medical associations, educational trusts and environmental conservation but they are united as long term investors in DPFC with the vast majority having added to their initial investment.

DPFC is managed by Eskmuir, a specialist real estate manager and investor with an exceptional track record, spanning close to four decades, of achieving reoccurring returns for charities and family trusts from commercial real estate investments. This provenance gives Eskmuir a unique perspective on the particular needs and requirements of charity investors.

Real estate investment risk is mitigated at a property and a portfolio level through actively targeting diversification, of location, sector and occupier risks whilst creating opportunities to grow income and in turn capital through active management of lease events. Diversity also acts to reduce risk during challenging market cycles whilst helping to enhance returns in stronger markets.

DPFC focuses on a diverse portfolio spanning the three primary



commercial real estate sectors, with a particular focus on multi-let properties in strong locations where tenants need and want to be. Selecting assets and sectors with favourable supply and demand imbalances helps to keep vacancy rates low, mitigate void costs and improve income returns. DPFC's average void rate since launch is just 3.8%, noticeably below benchmark levels. The assets DPFC has invested in attract tenants with strong financial covenants and has resulted in 100% of rents collected over the last 5 years.

Eskmuir's active asset management focuses on producing best-in-class cost efficient accommodation at

attractive price points tailored to the needs of occupiers. Time is invested in developing strong working relationships with tenants to understand their specific business needs, using that knowledge to inform and develop bespoke asset management plans for each property and to identify risks and opportunities.

Charity investors in DPFC have responded positively to its resilient returns. They benefit from the tax efficient structure, which effectively mirrors a charity's, and gives them the opportunity to access a truly diversified real estate portfolio, which is difficult for charity investors to access directly without material capital reserves.

We are aware that it is a challenging time for charity finance executives and bursars to maximise the returns from the funds they manage, particularly given the volatile interest rate environment over the past decade. DPFC is ideally suited to charities seeking reoccurring, sustainable, long-term income to support their objectives and meet the real total return targets set by their investment committees. Since launch the distribution has been increased, or maintained, year on year. In addition to this resilient income, DPFC has maintained the real value of the seed

investor's endowments, it has been entrusted with.

As a responsible investor and fund manager, Eskmuir strives to ensure its actions deliver a positive environmental and social impact, firmly believing that such an approach is not only compatible with investment returns but is actually a key contributor to them.

Prioritising sustainability is not only the right thing to do, but it is also good business sense. Both owners and occupiers favour energy efficient properties (for their environmental impact plus energy cost savings) which provide a healthy working environment. Owning assets that meet these criteria or are capable of being re-positioned to offset the risk of obsolescence, enables value to be unlocked.

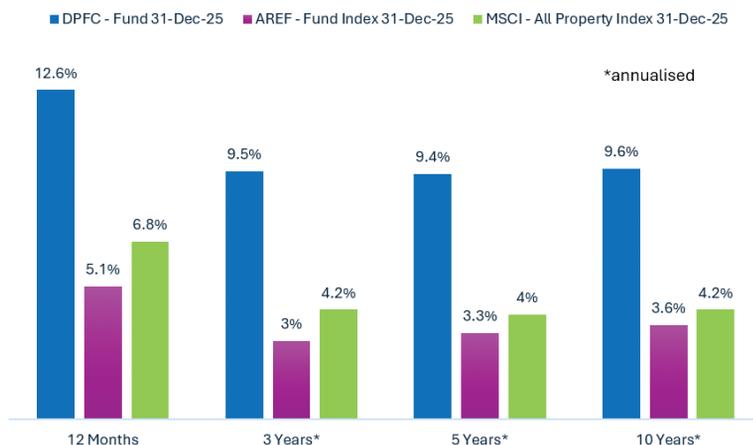
Enhancing a building's Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) is integral to refurbishment projects. It demonstrates the Fund's commitment to improving the environment, signals the energy efficiency of the asset to occupiers (along with the associates occupational cost savings), and offers protection from obsolescence which is attractive to purchasers when the asset is ready for sale.

Meanwhile, subscribing to the GRESB benchmark provides DPFC with a scoring framework which demonstrates constant sustainability improvements.

As DPFC moves into its second decade, we would like to thank our investors, occupiers and service providers for a wonderful 10 years and look forward to continuing those relationships in the years ahead.

Should you wish to hear more about DPFC or the fund's active management strategy please do not hesitate to contact me at DPFC@eskmuir.com. Further details can also be found at www.dpfc-eskmuir.co.uk.

Total Returns





charitytimes

What is the Charity Times Leadership Network?

The Charity Times Leadership Network is a membership service, created by the publishers of Charity Times, which has been designed to help provide charity leaders with the tools and guidance required to be a stronger and more influential leader.

What does membership include?

Premium membership to the network includes the following:

- A print edition of Charity Times magazine bi-monthly, delivered to an address of your choice
- Discounts on all Charity Times events in 2021
- A daily e-newsletter, containing key headlines and exclusive, in-depth content on issues affecting charity leadership
- Exclusive invitations to Charity Times events
- Access to regular surveys and reports
- Access to in-depth case studies, exclusive interviews and leadership diaries
- Access to the full archive of Charity Times digital magazines
- A monthly e-mail from the editor, providing a digestible round-up of the month's most popular and important content

Our team of investigative journalists are working hard to uncover some of the biggest trends and

issues from across the sector to ensure our members are constantly kept up to date with all aspects of charity leadership.

Additionally, we've teamed up with leaders from across the sector to help members feel part of a community, whereby sharing ideas and experiences leads to better professional development. Members will be offered the opportunity to share their own leadership experiences – in the form of diaries, case studies, interviews and blogs – in exchange for access to the same content from others across the sector.

Why should I join?

Good charity leadership has never been more important. By being a part of the Charity Times Leadership Network, you'll be provided with a range of tools designed to help you lead your organisation to success, whilst being influential in the process.

Sold already? Visit www.charitytimes.com to select the appropriate package for you.

Or reach out to Shannon.Woods@CharityTimes.com to find out more

Career path: Building a charity from the ground up

ANSWERS BY POLLY MARTIN

Polly Martin, CEO of National Trails UK, reflects on the unexpected route that took her from art history to leading a national charity.

How did you land your current role, and what was your career path leading up to it?

I landed my current role thanks in part to persistent googling! After around eight years in heritage policy I was ready for the next step. I first fell for National Trails in 2017, planning day long walks along the Thames Path from train station to train station after my first long-term relationship ended. I started looking for roles that matched my skill set and came across a newly registered charity, National Trails UK. A chat with the administrator, Jo, mentioned an upcoming policy role. But when I saw the CEO job description, it felt like a perfect fit. Two rounds of interviews later, I got the job! I could never have imagined this path at university. I studied History of Art intending to be an auctioneer, but left the commercial art world after 10 months at Christies Auction House. A curiosity about politics led me to a role in the Lib Dem Lords' Whips' Office, which in turn started my work in heritage policy. Since then, I've worked in several membership organisations, usually in small teams, which taught me the various roles and functions needed to run a not for profit.

What is the most interesting part of your job?



The most interesting part of my job is also the most challenging: developing an impactful organisation from the ground up. While the Board had registered the Charity and established governance, the last few years have involved testing, trialling and iterating with my small team to build a membership organisation that responds members' needs and makes the National Trails more inclusive. I have learnt so much from the process; it has been my biggest professional development so far.

What would be your alternative career?

I'm not sure, probably either a jewellery designer or running a bookshop? I made and sold jewellery as a teenager and seriously considered art college to study jewellery design. As for bookshops, I worked in them during my gap year and at university. While it was hard work, I loved recommending books and running author events.

What inspired you to work in the charity sector?

I love working in membership organisations, and I love making the world a better place. It just so happens that those roles tend to be in charities!

What challenges do you face in your day-to-day work?

Capacity: I have become much better at prioritising and managing my time, but I still tend to underestimate how long tasks will take. Feeling overwhelmed: creating something new whilst also in a new role can make everything feel as though it is happening all at once. Funding: it is extremely tough right now for all charities.

What would make the biggest positive difference to the sector right now?

A major positive change would be a funding landscape that allows environmental charities like NUTK, to offer competitive salaries. Too often, charities rely on employees' passion to 'top up' low pay, whether due to limited funding or a desire to maximise support for beneficiaries. This can lead to burnout, and restrict diversity in the sector, as only those privileged few can afford to accept lower salaries. Fair pay would not only benefit employees but ultimately strengthen the sector and the communities we serve.

Case study: What GOSH learned from its first-ever livestream fundraiser

WRITTEN BY SARAH BISSELL

Gaming and streaming are opening up exciting new ways to engage supporters and raise vital funds, as Sarah Bissell, GOSH Charity's Deputy Director of Relationship Fundraising, explains.

When we set out to host our first-ever livestreamed fundraising event at Great Ormond Street Hospital Charity (GOSH Charity), we knew we were stepping into new territory.

Gaming and streaming is a growing area of focus for the charity and one that presents exciting opportunities to reach new audiences. With GOSH Charity in the midst of its biggest-ever fundraising appeal - Build it. Beat it - to help build a new Children's Cancer Centre at Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH), identifying new income streams is vital to help us meet our ambitious £300m target.

The Curious Case of the Copper Key, an online whodunnit-style event fronted by YouTube star TommyInnit last month, marked our first-ever livestreamed fundraiser. While we have been exploring opportunities within the gaming space for a while, this event represented a significant step forward that has given us invaluable insight into how we reach new online audiences.

Why gaming and streaming?

As of 2024, there were an estimated

37.7 million video game users in the UK, and that number will continue to grow. For GOSH Charity, gaming partnerships and streamed fundraising offer an invaluable opportunity to engage new audiences through activities they enjoy. We see reaching supporters in their digital communities as a key area for the future of fundraising - and we know many other charities are exploring this too.

To build our presence in this fundraising space, we developed a business case to establish a dedicated gaming and streaming team - we hired a senior manager with experience in the gaming sector and paired them with an existing colleague with brilliant first-hand knowledge of content creation. We also established a Gaming Board, made up of experts from gaming companies, agencies and talent management, who have shared crucial insights into the industry and helped us expand our network in this area.

We had already seen success within gaming and streaming, including working with the brilliant DanTDM to fund £300,000 worth of gaming equipment at GOSH, but we were

looking for further ways to build authenticity, credibility and income with online audiences. Through conversations with Tiltify - the platform we use for streamed fundraising - we began to explore how we could grow our reputation in this area. From those discussions, the concept for our first-ever livestream fundraiser, The Curious Case of the Copper Key, started to take shape.

Partnering with TommyInnit

Our collaboration with TommyInnit came via one of our Gaming Board members, who manages the YouTube star. As we developed the idea, she recognised it would be a meaningful fit for TommyInnit, also known as Tom Simons. In 2022, Tom lost his close friend and fellow content creator Technoblade to cancer. His loss inspired Tom to use his online platforms to raise vital funds and awareness to help in the fight against cancer.

Once Tom was confirmed as host, we needed to develop an authentic idea that matched his style of content and what his audience enjoys. Working with Tiltify, we put together an interactive whodunnit-style mystery



featuring a cast of much-loved creators – including YouTubers MatPat and Keith Habersberger and TikTok stars Abbie Budden, Imogen Andrews and Henry Calvert – who each stepped into the role of a suspect in the story.

Viewers were invited to work together in real time to solve the mystery, unlocking clues through donations. The event even included surprise moments from well-known supporters, including a video message from Gordon Ramsay. The result was a fantastic, upbeat event that offered audiences a fun storyline to follow, while uniting everyone behind our Build it. Beat it. appeal.

What we learned

We are still learning so much, but one important lesson is that creators and influencers understand their audiences intimately - they know what they want to hear and how. Their followers are already a tightly knit community who feel connected to one another, which is fundamentally different to traditional fundraising events, where you might have hundreds of individuals or small groups taking part independently. With

creator audiences, you are stepping into a ready-made community that is hugely engaged and passionate about what their favourite creator says – and a successful activation needs to keep that in mind throughout.

New formats come with risk. We were mindful that it was difficult to predict who would watch and how much would be donated. To help mitigate this, we worked hard to secure sponsorship and major gifts ahead of the event. Thanks to our partnership with Tiltify, we attracted brilliant sponsors including Staple Games, Ripple, AdoptMe, PaySafe, LEK and Miniclip. We were also incredibly fortunate to secure two matched donors at £150,000 as well as a generous donation from MatPat and his wife Stephanie. The support from our amazing sponsors and donors on top of the donations from those taking part helped mitigate the risks.

For other charities exploring gaming and streaming opportunities, my biggest advice is: start small, test and learn. There is less data to rely on when it comes to gaming and streaming than in other fundraising areas, and you will

need to lean into some discomfort. Having evidence of what you have done builds credibility - so the sooner you begin, the sooner you can learn.

The outcome and looking ahead

Overall, our livestream fundraiser gained more than 183,000 views and raised nearly £470,000. This will go towards building a new Children's Cancer Centre at GOSH - a world-leading facility bringing together pioneering research, cutting-edge treatments and child-centred care. Too many childhoods are lost to cancer and this centre can help change that.

Going forwards, gaming and streaming will continue to be a major focus for GOSH Charity. It offers a meaningful way to connect with new audiences and we are continuing to build relationships with gamers, streamers and content creators who want to support seriously ill children. The Curious Case of the Copper Key marked an important step in our gaming and streaming work, and with other exciting things in the pipeline, we look forward to continuing to grow in this area.

Cranfield Trust: A guide for charity leaders on navigating local authority devolution

WRITTEN BY CRANFIELD TRUST

Charities face uncertainty as England's local government restructures. The advice? Adapt, collaborate, and plan to thrive strategically.

Local government in England is undergoing its most significant reorganisation in decades. Across the country, councils are merging, combined authorities are forming, and new mayoral positions are being created. For charities, these changes bring both uncertainty and opportunity.

This major restructuring is likely to impact how you, as charity leaders, interact with your local government. Funding streams that currently flow through district councils may shift to new combined authorities. Commissioning priorities will be set at a regional rather than a local level. The officers and councillors you've built relationships with over the years may move on or see their roles change entirely.

With so much on your plate already, the prospect of major changes to your local authority is likely to be a daunting one. However, with enough forward thinking and the right approach, you can turn this transition into an opportunity for your charity. In this

guide, you'll find expert insights from our team at Cranfield Trust to help you prepare for whatever local authority changes lie ahead.

Understanding what's happening

In many cases, devolution involves two processes happening alongside each other. The first is the creation of combined authorities with elected mayors, bringing new powers, priorities, and funding streams to regions. The second is local government reorganisation: the merging of district councils into larger unitary authorities.

Stephen Cahill, regional manager at Cranfield Trust with experience in local governance, explains the challenge: "From a charity perspective, what they're facing is huge uncertainty because established relationships are potentially breaking down, and there are no ready answers."

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that local authorities themselves are still working through what these changes mean. "It's contested space

at the moment," Cahill notes. "Local governments don't necessarily know all the answers, and central government has an end goal in sight, but they've still got to figure out the steps to get there."

At Cranfield Trust, we've seen a significant increase in the number of organisations seeking our support amid this uncertainty. Will contracts be renewed? Will commissioning priorities change? Will the relationships built over years with council officers survive the transition to new, larger structures?

The real impact on charities

For many charities, their identity and purpose are tied to a specific local area. They know their community, they've built relationships with local commissioners, and their services are designed around local needs. When local authorities merge, that connection to a place becomes complicated. A charity that has delivered services for one borough may suddenly find itself operating within a much larger combined authority, one



with different priorities, new decision-makers, and contracts that span a wider area.

There's also genuine concern that larger authorities may favour larger organisations. Stephen explains: "Big government likes big business. There's certainly an element of that: bigger invariably becomes better, or what is perceived to be better."

This creates a particular challenge for smaller, locally-focused charities. Where previously they might have bid for contracts worth £50,000, the new landscape may see contracts consolidated at £500,000 or more. Without the capacity to deliver at that scale, smaller organisations risk being shut out entirely.

From a trustee's perspective, Cahill believes dealing with uncertainty has to be high on the agenda. "What is the likely disruption or risk to the charity?

That's the first and foremost question that should be in every single agenda. They need to do some scenario planning, and they need to really look at risk management."

Despite the challenges, Cahill believes it's not as bleak as it may first seem. "There may be different opportunities emerging," he suggests. "It's about looking for novel solutions and different combinations of services." The charities that thrive will be those that can identify and fill gaps in provision as the new structures bed in.

How to successfully navigate these changes

Sue Elder, regional manager at Cranfield Trust with plenty of experience supporting charities through major changes, identifies three common factors in organisations that successfully navigate uncertainty:

clear vision, clear communication, and flexibility.

"Having clarity around the end point of change is crucial," Elder explains. "Clearly articulating: what are we seeking to change? What external factors are prompting us to change? What are the potential benefits? Given that implementing change can be challenging, are we prepared to endure the 'pain' that change may involve in order to reap the rewards?"

Communication, she emphasises, is not a one-off event but a constant throughout periods of change, and it must be two-way. "Listening to people's concerns or challenges that may present themselves along the way and addressing them. Not everyone embraces new processes or systems at the same rate; some adapt more easily than others."

Willingness to adapt while keeping

focus on the end goal is the third crucial element. “Blindly pursuing a plan at all costs is likely to reduce the likelihood of success,” Elder notes. “Sometimes it may be necessary to take one step back, or stop and review, in order to take two steps forward.”

Practical steps for charity leaders

Don't wait for change to happen to you. Elder's advice is unequivocal: “Don't put your head in the sand and wait until changes are 'done to you'. Be proactive and engage with the local authority to gain information, raise questions or concerns, and as far as possible, be part of decision-making.”

Build relationships now. We're hearing from charity leaders in our community that strong working partnerships with local authorities have been critical during this period of uncertainty. Those relationships enable charities to access up-to-date information and ensure their voices are heard as decisions are made.

Plan for multiple scenarios. With outcomes uncertain, charity boards should consider many different possibilities. Sue recommends exploring alternative scenarios, assessing what each might look like and what would be required to make them work. “The important thing is to discuss how the changes might impact your organisation and plan for eventualities, revisiting the options as the process develops,” she says.

Follow the money. Cahill offers a simple but powerful piece of advice: “Follow the pounds. Where's the money coming from? What's happening to that money and where's it going? Just keep following the pounds.” Understanding how funding flows will change under new structures is essential for planning.

Consider collaboration seriously. Cahill sees devolution as forcing a

necessary conversation: “It's a bit like the tide going out; it's not long before the rocks start coming up. Now is the time to start getting involved in the collaboration debate.” This might mean exploring alliances with similar organisations, partnering with complementary charities, or investigating a formal merger.

Get your house in order. At Cranfield Trust, we recommend that any organisation ensures its governance is in good shape ahead of any major change, collaboration, or merger. Sound finances and strong governance make you a more attractive partner and more resilient to shocks.

Develop procurement skills. Cahill highlights a practical gap: “Local charities need to really mug up on procurement skills. It's not rocket science, but it's something they need to start turning their mind to now.” Understanding how local government commissioning works will be essential for securing contracts in the new landscape.

As Elder summarises: “Control the controllables. Do what you can to respond to the situation and put your organisation in the best position to be resilient. COVID was a fine example; those organisations that adopted a 'can-do' attitude and adapted to circumstances were the ones that thrived.”

What support is available?

Charity leaders navigating devolution don't have to do it alone. Support is available from multiple sources, and those who lean on these resources will be better placed to weather the uncertainty.

Your local authority. The quality of support from local authorities varies, but many are running webinars, consultation sessions, and engagement events to help charities understand and prepare for upcoming changes.

Charity leaders who have engaged with these opportunities have told us they've been invaluable, both for accessing information and for ensuring their voices are heard in the decision-making process.

National bodies. Several national organisations offer guidance and resources to help charities navigate periods of change. NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations) provides practical guidance on everything from governance to public procurement, and regularly publishes insights on how policy changes affect the sector. ACEVO (Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations) offers leadership support and policy guidance for charity leaders. Both organisations have been tracking the implications of devolution and local government reorganisation for charities.

Cranfield Trust. We provide free management support to charities navigating these challenges. Our services include mentoring from experienced professionals who can help you think through strategic options, governance reviews to ensure your organisation is fit for purpose, and facilitation support for conversations with potential partners or merger candidates.

In addition to our consultancy and mentoring projects, our library of webinars includes resources on organisational change, collaboration, and 'investability', helping your charity to put its best foot forward. We also offer plenty of free reading resources to support charity leaders.

The landscape is changing, but charities that prepare, collaborate, and remain adaptable will find ways not just to survive but to thrive. If your organisation is facing uncertainty around local authority changes, we're here to help.

New risks, new choices

WRITTEN BY RICHARD MAITLAND, SENIOR PARTNER, SARASIN & PARTNERS

Amid evolving markets, UK charities are increasingly relying on expertise, strategic guidance, and diversified investments to safeguard returns.

Of the 170,000 registered charities in the UK, just under 8,000 have assets of between £1m and £1bn. A further 15 to 20 have assets of over £1bn¹. It is therefore unsurprising that a cadre of professional accounting, law, investment and consultancy firms has emerged to help asset owners consider how these assets can be deployed and overseen.

The past 30 years have seen increasing specialism and sophistication across the charity sector. Historically, charities were served by professionals primarily focused on private clients and pension funds. In the early 1990s, several firms carved out niche, charity-focused practices. Across law, accountancy and investment, focused resources were deployed over the following decade, driving consolidation as leaders in each field proved their value and promoted one another on merit. Competition among the best providers has definitively increased both the quality and breadth of services available to trustees and executives.

This has been matched by greater professionalism within charities themselves, driven by improved education, enhanced regulation and a deeper talent pool. However, success and scale bring new challenges. The availability of third-party service providers is broader than ever, partly because former core client groups such as pension funds are in structural

decline. While competition should be welcomed, the growing presence of newer, non-specialist providers makes robust due diligence more important than ever.

Sarasin & Partners has been at the forefront of charity investment management for over 30 years. We have helped drive standards higher, trained more than 5,000 trustees and executives, and invested heavily in our capabilities. Our team includes individuals with career-long charity and multi-asset experience. We review the investments of approximately 120 new charities each year and work with over 520 on an ongoing basis, assessing how their circumstances evolve against changing market conditions. This includes both deep strategic reviews and regular refreshes of Investment Policy Statements. Many of us also serve as trustees or investment committee members, allowing for balanced judgements and empathy in our work.

Having addressed a wide range of charity-focused investment issues over three decades, we begin 2026 by considering two of the greatest challenges facing those responsible for charitable assets in the year ahead.

Future returns and strategy

The Charity Commission's CC14 guidance on investment matters remains clear: trustees should "take advice from someone experienced in investment matters", unless there

is good reason not to do so². For example, sufficient expertise may exist internally. Some charities appoint consultants to sit between themselves and their investment managers; this can be appropriate depending on circumstances.

However, the strongest investment managers are structured to provide bespoke strategic advice and, critically, should be able to demonstrate quantifiable evidence of adding strategic value. While implementation may reflect a manager's style, independent strategic guidance can still be provided, particularly where managers have the flexibility to invest across asset classes and outsource when necessary.

Sarasin & Partners has deployed significant intellectual capital to the strategic dimension of investment management for more than two decades. In the *Sarasin & Partners Compendium of Investment*³, we analyse returns dating back to 1900. Drawing on over 125 years of data across major and peripheral asset classes, the *Compendium* dissects long-term return series for the benefit of trustees and executives.

Individual asset class returns are instructive. More important, however, is how diversified charity portfolios would have performed in practice, with outcomes influenced by timing, composition and the ability to adapt. Our analysis of a classic UK 'endowments' approach over 125 years

was pioneering when first published 20 years ago. While the real return of approximately 4.3% per annum gross of costs⁴ is often cited, it should not be extrapolated. That figure reflects the full 125-year period and several intervening spans, but discrete five, seven and ten-year periods produced markedly varied outcomes. Without detailed analysis of rolling and discrete data, errors in expectation are inevitable.

Our latest Compendium will be published in March 2026, followed later in the year by a complementary publication. Together they will examine historic analysis and forward projections relevant to charity investors. However, the greatest value lies in direct client engagement: interpreting the full data set, undertaking bespoke analysis and enabling trustees to interrogate the data themselves. This provides a robust foundation for strategies aligned with individual objectives and constraints.

2026 conclusion: An appropriate investment strategy is likely to remain the single most important driver of returns in the years ahead and continues to form the backbone of a successful investment policy.

Market structure: active, passive and private markets

In recent years, the majority of active fund managers have not delivered returns in line with commonly used indices. While important, relative performance versus index is only one evaluation metric. There has always been cyclicity in the proportion of active managers outperforming; there have been periods when indices were comparatively easy to beat. 2025 marked a particular low point for active management.

High market concentration, with the largest companies dominating

returns, has created headwinds for diversified active managers. When markets skew toward a narrow group of stocks or sectors, managers can struggle to justify deviation from benchmarks. Furthermore, many active managers base decisions on fundamental analysis of profits growth and valuation. Extended periods driven by sentiment and momentum rather than fundamentals have been painful for such approaches. The years 2023, 2024 and 2025 proved especially challenging.

Compound performance figures over one, three, five and ten years currently appear unattractive. Yet compound data inherently over-weights recent periods. The key question is whether strong long-term managers have suddenly become poor, or whether investors are reacting to short-term signals. Despite repeated reminders that “past performance is not a reliable guide to future performance”, capital frequently flows to recent winners. This can result in appointing managers at cyclical peaks and abandoning others at cyclical troughs — an industry dynamic in which investors buy high and sell low.

More disciplined investors analyse discrete, year-by-year data over extended horizons, placing recent performance in context. Done properly, this increases the likelihood of buying at more attractive points and persevering through inevitable periods of underperformance.

In 2026, decisions around equity exposure extend beyond active versus passive. The structure of public markets has evolved materially. The number of listed companies has declined in most regions, while the largest have grown larger. Fewer companies are coming to market, and many remain private for longer, supported by substantial pools of private equity and debt capital.

Maintaining historical levels of diversification now increasingly requires exposure to private markets. Doing nothing may appear conservative, yet it results in reduced sectoral and stock diversification. There are parallels with investors who, 15 to 20 years ago, resisted greater international diversification.

Private markets bring higher costs, illiquidity and at times optimistic marketing of returns. However, costs are moderating, net outcomes can justify ownership, and liquidity risks can be managed. We do not assume past returns will be fully replicated, but private equity and private credit play an important role not only in enhancing returns, but in preserving sensible diversification.

2026 conclusion: Top-quartile results are unlikely to be achieved by chasing the latest outperforming manager, asset class or implementation style. Investment remains a marathon rather than a sprint. As John Maynard Keynes observed, “markets can remain irrational longer than you can remain solvent”. They are testing the patience of many active managers today, yet strong fundamentals have historically reasserted themselves. Faster-growing, high-quality companies have ultimately outperformed lower-quality peers, whether listed or unlisted.

Disclaimer: The value of your investments and any income derived from them can fall as well as rise and you may not get back the amount originally invested. Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future results and may not be repeated. Forecasts are not a reliable indicator of future performance.

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Great expectation

WRITTEN BY SHAUN LE MESSURIER, CLIENT DIRECTOR, ARC RESEARCH,
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Strong returns tempt investors to forget history's bruises and markets' long, testing silences.

Howard Marks wrote that “there’s little that’s as dangerous for investor health as insistence on extrapolating today’s events into the future.”¹ That observation feels timely. Financial markets have demonstrated strong performance since the February 2009 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) low, evidenced by the 7.7% annualised increase in the ARC Sterling Steady Growth ACI (monthly data). This compares favourably to the 6.2% annualised performance demonstrated by the index since its inception in December 2003. The past three years have been particularly favourable, with the ARC Sterling Steady Growth ACI recording an annualised return of 8.3% over this period, with only the briefest of wobbles in Q2 2025.

Such conditions create fertile ground for “recency bias”—the tendency to place disproportionate weight on recent outcomes while ignoring longer-term historical trends and probabilities. In markets, recency bias often manifests in perceived wisdom such as “markets always go up in the long run” or “time in the market beats timing the market.” While these statements can contain truth, they may also lull investors into a false sense of security.

The ARC Charity Indices (ACI) provide data back to December 2003, but to add deeper historical perspective, we extended the performance series to nearly four decades by linking the ARC Sterling Steady Growth ACI to a

representative proxy portfolio. This extended dataset provides a clearer picture of the potential experience for a typical ARC Sterling Steady Growth ACI investor during more challenging periods. For example, an unlucky investor who hypothetically entered at the height of the Dot-Com bubble in 2000, may have seen an initial loss of nearly one third, failed to break even for five years, was then hit by the GFC sell off, and only began to earn sustained positive returns 107 months after the initial investment. Markets have tended to rise “in the long run,” but nearly nine years of zero net return would severely test anyone’s faith in that mantra.

It is reassuring to note that discretionary fund managers (DFMs) overseeing charity assets do not appear to be showing signs of recency bias. The latest ARC Research Market Sentiment Survey indicates that DFMs remain positive on equities but not excessively so. Estimated equity allocations—derived from the factor model used for performance estimation—remain solidly within historical ranges.

The greater risk may lie with end clients. Strong recent performance, upbeat financial headlines, and bullish market forecasts may encourage



less sophisticated investors to seek a higher risk profile than their true tolerance allows. If markets were to suffer a severe or prolonged downturn, such investors could be vulnerable to damaging behavioural mistakes—most notably capitulation at precisely the wrong moment.

For charity DFMs, the current environment reinforces the importance of rigorous suitability assessments, clear risk education, and disciplined expectation management. Ensuring that clients understand historical market cycles—and the possibility of extended drawdowns—remains central to protecting them from behavioural errors that jeopardise long term investment outcomes.

¹ *The Most Important Thing: Uncommon Sense for the Thoughtful Investor*, Columbia University Press, 2011, Chapter 8.

² Blaine, C., “Every major analyst’s S&P 500 price target for 2026,” Dec. 29, 2025, *TheStreet*.

Multi-Asset Funds	Investment Manager	Fund Size (£m)	Cash %	Bond %	Equities	
					UK %	Intl %
Barclays Charity Fund	Barclays	257.3	3.1	16.3	20.3	50.5
Armed Forces Charities Growth & Income Fund	BlackRock	412.4	(8.9)	30.7	3.9	57.0
Catholic Charities Growth & Income Fund	BlackRock	154.4	(1.3)	21.7	2.8	59.2
Charities Growth & Income Fund	BlackRock	135.7	(3.7)	23.0	3.8	57.9
IFSL CAF ESG Cautious	LGT WM for CAF	24.7	6.4	44.5	7.3	34.0
IFSL CAF ESG Income & Growth	LGT WM for CAF	114.6	8.9	24.4	16.1	46.9
IFSL CAF ESG Growth	LGT WM for CAF	99.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Charity Multi-Asset Fund	Cazenove	846.0	4.0	8.6	0.0	74.4
Sustainable Charity Multi-Asset Fund	Cazenove	2742.0	2.7	9.5	0.0	74.8
Catholic Investment Fund	CCLA	212.5	5.2	9.2	9.1	63.3
CBF Church of England Investment Fund	CCLA	2064.3	2.5	11.0	8.6	63.1
COIF Charities Ethical Investment Fund	CCLA	2186.5	2.9	10.8	8.6	63.2
COIF Charities Investment Fund	CCLA	3528.7	2.2	10.4	8.7	62.9
"Epworth Multi Asset Fund for Charities	Epworth	54.9	2.1	10.5	10.4	61.2
M&G Charity Multi Asset Fund	M&G	272.2	4.3	23.1	29.5	40.0
Newton Growth & Income Fund for Charities	Newton	694.5	0.0	17.0	33.7	49.2
Newton Ethically Screened Fund for Charities	Newton	56.4	2.1	14.2	24.5	57.1
Newton Growth & Income Fund (Responsible)	Newton	108.5	0.0	14.8	17.6	65.5
Global Income & Growth Fund for Charities	Quilter Cheviot	204.9	3.3	18.4	19.3	51.1
Active Income and Growth Fund for Charities	Rathbones	226.5	3.0	21.1	16.2	48.1
Rathbones Charity Growth & Income Fund	Rathbones	315.2	3.4	14.9	7.3	67.6
Charity Assets Trust	Ruffer	524.9	3.1	52.3	13.8	17.5
Sarasin Climate Active Endowments Fund	Sarasin & Partners	605.4	4.1	8.3	3.1	70.4
Sarasin Endowments Fund	Sarasin & Partners	2017.7	3.0	7.7	5.4	68.3
Sarasin Income & Reserves Fund	Sarasin & Partners	90.6	2.3	59.3	1.8	23.1
Trojan Fund	Troy	5186.2	2.1	45.1	11.2	29.6
Waverton Charity Growth & Income Fund	W1M	153.3	2.3	18.0	6.3	62.1
Peer Group Indices¹						
Sterling Cautious Charity Index	ARC		31.9	47.7	4.8	5.7
Sterling Balanced Asset Charity Index	ARC		12.7	30.7	9.4	24.2
Sterling Steady Growth Charity Index	ARC		4.7	23.7	13.2	38.9
Sterling Equity Risk Charity Index	ARC		0.6	20.5	20.9	42.8
Market Indices¹						
UK Equities	iShares					
International Equities	iShares					
UK Sovereign Bonds	iShares					
UK Corporate Bond	iShares					
UK Property	iShares					
Cash	-					

Property %	Other %	Last Quarter	Last 12 Months	YTD 2025	Last 3 Years	Last 5 Years	Last 10 Years
3.6	6.2	4.5	13.1	13.1	32.7	37.5	107.1
0.0	17.3	4.0	12.8	12.8	30.0	31.6	102.2
0.0	17.6	3.7	11.8	11.8	29.9	32.1	102.6
0.0	19.0	4.1	9.9	9.9	24.0	24.7	0.0
0.0	7.9	3.6	6.9	6.9	14.6	0.0	0.0
0.0	3.7	5.5	10.3	10.3	30.6	0.0	0.0
0.0	0.0	6.1	10.6	10.6	33.4	0.0	0.0
4.4	8.6	3.3	11.3	11.3	34.2	38.7	97.5
3.2	9.8	5.0	11.4	11.4	29.8	38.1	0.0
4.9	8.4	(0.6)	(2.5)	(2.5)	14.8	0.0	0.0
4.3	10.5	0.1	(1.2)	(1.2)	17.0	24.9	123.8
4.4	10.0	0.5	(2.2)	(2.2)	17.2	23.6	113.8
4.6	11.2	0.4	(2.1)	(2.1)	15.8	23.8	114.5
3.7	12.1	2.7	3.4	3.4	21.0	26.8	0.0
1.4	1.9	6.0	16.0	16.0	33.1	52.0	103.6
0.0	0.0	5.1	14.3	14.3	35.7	52.7	133.8
0.0	2.1	4.9	11.8	11.8	31.0	39.2	124.4
0.0	2.0	4.5	11.1	11.1	34.9	40.0	114.7
1.6	6.4	3.7	11.1	11.1	33.7	0.0	0.0
4.6	7.1	3.9	12.5	12.5	30.8	34.0	94.3
1.9	5.0	2.2	-	-	-	-	-
0.0	13.3	1.5	12.2	12.2	2.8	22.6	57.8
2.9	11.1	0.6	3.9	3.9	26.0	24.2	0.0
3.7	12.0	1.1	5.0	5.0	27.7	26.8	94.9
0.0	13.5	1.6	6.1	6.1	16.0	(0.6)	31.2
0.0	12.0	3.2	9.1	9.1	19.8	29.6	75.6
1.9	9.4	3.9	15.1	15.1	44.0	47.8	0.0
0.0	9.8	1.5	5.8	5.8	14.6	9.7	28.4
5.0	18.1	2.6	8.6	8.6	22.8	22.4	60.2
5.2	14.3	3.0	9.3	9.3	27.2	29.1	81.3
4.4	10.8	3.0	9.3	9.3	28.8	32.4	91.0
		6.8	25.6	25.6	48.3	83.6	131.3
		3.2	12.8	12.8	59.3	80.6	250.4
		3.1	5.0	5.0	5.3	(24.0)	(1.4)
		2.7	6.7	6.7	18.1	(8.0)	28.2
		5.2	9.9	9.9	6.1	(7.7)	(13.8)
		1.0	4.3	4.3	14.9	16.5	19.3

Source / Asset Risk Consultants

Key The asset allocations presented are based on estimates provided by ARC. The estimates are calculated using statistical methods that attempt to derive a model portfolio whose historical returns most closely match the actual ACI results.

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