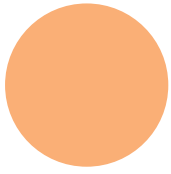# Member briefing

October 2023

An evening for chairs of trusts and foundations

Introduction

In October 2023, more than 30 chairs and trustees of ACF members came together for our annual evening for chairs of trusts and foundations. This year's theme was the importance of inclusive boards.

We were delighted that Anj Handa of Getting on Board facilitated the session, joined by a panel of foundation trustees who shared their insights:

- Kate Bradley, trustee of [Greggs Foundation](#)
- Segun Olowookere, chair of [The Blagrave Trust](#)
- Elliot Vaughn, chair of [GiveOut](#)
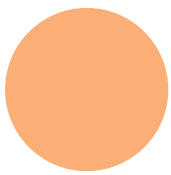
What an inclusive board looks like

As our facilitator Anj Handa set out: *"Inclusive board cultures are those where members' perspectives are regularly elicited and valued. For boards to be effective, they need to foster an egalitarian and inclusive culture — one that elevates different voices, values contrasting perspectives, and holds space for uncomfortable conversations."*
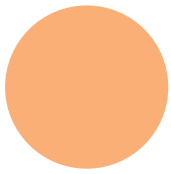
Why build an inclusive board environment

Research[1] shows that inclusive board cultures bring about multiple benefits, including:

- Increased legitimacy for organisations working with, and for, diverse communities
- More effective decision-making, as challenge and change are embraced
- Greater innovation and fewer blind spots
- Increased levels of satisfaction among trustees and staff

Having a board of trustees where members are drawn from a range of backgrounds and bring a diversity of thought and experience is important practice for stronger foundations. Diversity can substantially benefit boards but is not enough to ensure greater effectiveness. Building an inclusive culture which values fairness, respect, equality, dignity, and autonomy will help get the most out of any board, no matter its composition.

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[1] https://media.frc.org.uk/documents/FRC_Board_Diversity_and_Effectiveness_in_FTSE_350_Companies.pdf ; https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4987_the-inclusion-imperative-for-boards/DI_The-inclusion-imperative-for-boards.pdf
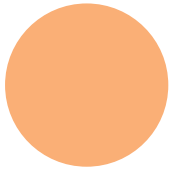
How to create an inclusive culture on your board – practical tips

Getting started

- You don't need to be an expert on inclusion to foster an inclusive board culture. Intention matters: the key point is to make a start and head in the right direction.

- Thinking about when you've been treated unfairly and how that made you feel is a useful starting point for how you work with a diverse board to develop an inclusive culture.

Continuing on the journey

- Inclusion is an ever-evolving journey, rather than a destination to reach and get comfortable in.

- Like any team, boards must navigate and adapt to changes to the internal and external environment. These can impact even well-established organisational cultures, for example changes of personnel.

- Boards need to accept they will sometimes get things wrong on this journey as they try new things. Be kind if it doesn't work - learn from mistakes and sustain a real commitment to inclusive practice.

Role of the chair

- As a chair, you can set the tone and role model behaviours for the rest of the board.

- Chairs should value contrasting perspectives and hold space for the difficult discussions. The chair can particularly amplify quieter voices and consciously repeat their views.

- Invite feedback about what you as a chair could do differently to foster a more inclusive board culture.

- Chairs have an additional responsibility to foster an inclusive culture with the executive team. Inclusion works best when it's embraced throughout the organisation and not just at board level.

Practices for more inclusive board meetings

- Hold time at the start of board meetings (15 minutes) to check in with how people are feeling.

- Keep online/hybrid meetings shorter (90 minutes – 2 hours) and in-person meetings longer (3 hours) so that board members can stay engaged.

- For hybrid meetings, level the playing field by having everyone individually on camera and nominate a person in the room to be a champion for online colleagues.

- Try to meet in-person at least once a year, with the offer of travel expenses. Investing time and resources in a board away day enables trustees to build relationships. Don't underestimate the value of having a meal together – this can be transformative for board members to get to know one another.

- Chairs should keep a speaking list noting who has taken airtime in the meeting, which helps ensure some board members don't dominate and others can be brought into the conversation.

- Share board papers well in advance, giving board members plenty of time to digest the material and consider questions. Accommodating additional needs, such as dyslexia, neurodiversity or caring responsibilities, often benefits everyone.

- Accept that the pace will sometimes need to be slowed down in meetings. It's better to respect everyone's working style and ensure all voices are heard, rather than rush the conversation.

- Table an annual discussion on board culture, which could be linked to an anonymous survey. Ask the right questions to check the temperature of your board culture and prompt open and honest discussion.

Relationships

- An inclusive culture is one that embraces listening and learning. Board members should ask themselves: "whose perspective do we not understand?" Often the quietest people have the most impactful thing to say.

- It's within all of our gifts to be allies. Allyship is about behaviours – consistently supporting others from under-represented groups and ensuring they don't feel like a lone representative.

- Support newer board members by sharing your knowledge, skills and expertise.

- Reverse the mentoring mindset – younger people and those from different backgrounds have a lot to offer and teach others. How can other board members celebrate and better learn from different lived experience and perspectives?

- A WhatsApp group for the board can be helpful to foster relationships outside of board meetings. Be clear on the purpose of setting up a group and that it is used appropriately.

Addressing challenges

- An inclusive culture does not mean one which is less disagreeable. More inclusion should lead to the airing of different perspectives and the avoidance of groupthink.

- Highlight when there is a great deal of consensus and interrogate why this might be – you could instigate a debate to see if that is what the board really wants.

- When you have a contentious issue or a challenge, process is your friend! Agree together on the step-by-step process by which you run a more challenging discussion.

- Lean on committees or create subgroups to come up with different options.

- Psychological safety is the touchstone for disagreeing well – create an environment where board members feel empowered, can respectfully challenge and receive feedback with grace.

- Embedding inclusive practices is not a one size fits all approach. Reflect on what is working well and less well for your board and organisation.

- Discuss what you could all do differently to foster a more inclusive board culture, given it is everyone's responsibility to contribute to inclusion.

- Don't avoid succession planning – consider different processes you could adopt in the future when recruiting a chair and board members to move further towards diversity and inclusion.
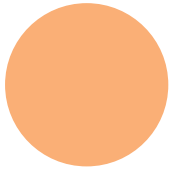
Further reading and resources

- [Getting on Board guides for charities](#), including trustee recruitment and diversifying your board
- [Young Trustees Movement](#)
- [ACF's Stronger Foundations initiative](#) including [10 pillars of stronger practice for chairs of foundations](#)