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Round table Governance and leadership in the non-profit sector Building inclusive structures through participatory Governance for a fairer future

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Abstract
This paper examines the historical dominance of trustee-led governance in the UK non-profit sector, a model originating in early charity law such as the Statute of Charitable Uses (1601). Trustee led governance are encompasses hierarchical, top-down decision-making structures that persist today.

In response to evolving public expectations, regulatory developments, and increasing organisational complexity, many charities are now exploring more inclusive and participatory governance approaches that broaden decision-making beyond small, centralised boards.

Drawing on contemporary research into the round table governance, this paper proposes a participatory governance model that emphasises equal voice, innovation, collaborative decision-making and the integration of diverse perspectives.

Evidence from participatory governance studies suggests that such models can enhance psychological safety, organisational commitment and trust, while reducing the risks associated with concentrated authority.

The paper argues that a hybrid model combining legal accountability of trustees with structured participatory processes offers a credible and forward-looking framework for building fairer, more inclusive and resilient non-profit organisations

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Introduction

UK charities and CICs have an extraordinary history of service and public trust (House of Lords, 2017). Our governance traditions rooted in centuries of charitable law and local stewardship and enabled generations of people to give, volunteer, and lead. UK no profit companies and charities are historically Trustee led and The core geometry of charity governance; board/trustee control at the apex, has persisted from 1601 to today. Historically, Trustees, were the principal decision makers with strong ties to the church and to the gentry.

In trustee led governance power can be described as geometrically triangle shaped were, decision making trickles from top to the bottom. Historically, mismanagement of power and resources were common thereby, in the 19th Century, the government brought in national regulation and the charity commission (Charity Digital, 2025).

The Charity commission is guides trustees work today(Charity Commission, 2026), and support decision making and giving trustees a clear guideline around regulations and legal capacities (Charity Digital, 2025; House of Lords, 2017).

Although many aspects of organisational practice have evolved since the early 17th century, the structure and influence of trustee boards have remained relatively consistent. Trustees or the board in the charity sector have remained the locust of authority (Charity Commission, 2026).

In some organisations, trustees may be appointed based on their existing relationships or familiarity with the organisation rather than on specific professional qualifications or leadership experience (Charity Digital, 2025). As a result, some boards may include members whose backgrounds are primarily rooted in voluntary involvement, which can lead to gaps in governance-related skills and leadership expertise. This can create challenges in ensuring that boards possess the full range of competencies needed for effective oversight and strategic decision-making(Charity Digital, 2025).

To instigate a more meaningful change it is crucial to recognise that prospects around contemporary expectation and regulatory development has shaped and put more pressure on to non-profit organisations to make core changes in organisation cultures and leadership.

Modern organisational environments demand greater transparency, accountability and representation (Bussu, Golan & Hargreaves, 2022). The social attitude towards charities are evolving and non-profit organisations are facing constant changes as clients are becoming more diverse consequently, small, centralised group led organisation are increasingly being reassessed (Bussu, Golan & Hargreaves, 2022).

This paper advances a round-table governance based on the participatory model, and designed to address the potential precincts of highly centralised leadership. While trustees play an essential legal role, concentrating decision-making power exclusively within a small group can restrict the range of insights available to the organisation (Agbodzakey, 2024). A participatory structure enables broader expertise and lived experience to shape decisions, strengthening organisational effectiveness and inclusivity (Wang, Hou & Li, 2022).

Building a round table in participatory governance

The inspiration behind round table governance, came from the Arthurian legend.
The profound symbolism of the round unveils a circular design, which eliminates hierarchy in the sitting arrangement (Quarterdeck, 2023).

The Round Table governance is based on equal participation, emphasizes on shared learning, open dialogues and facilitative leadership. Round Table governance can give all participant an equal voice to be the driving force of organisational changes.

Over recent decades, a combination of policy reform and changing public expectations has encouraged a shift in governance styles across the UK (Bussu et al., 2022). Non-profit sector aiming to encourage participation, inclusive practises and equity (Bussu et al., 2022) which could be perceived by millennial and future generation as a fundamental tenet in community development. Organisations are increasingly exploring approaches that emphasise inclusion, transparency and participatory leadership, reflecting a broader societal move towards shared decision-making and greater representation (Agbodzakey, 2024).

Referring to Alexis de Toqueville`s participation theory (Woldring, 2026), which based on the American government: He states that success of democracy is dependent on the ability of the citizen to engage (Woldring, 2026) in practical decision making, engage in political activities and form an association. He emphasizes that the role of civil society, is to provide equitable conditions to foster democratic participation.

In participatory leadership models, all members of an organisation are given the opportunity to express their views and contribute to decisions that influence their work or volunteering experience. Involving people directly in democratic decision-making processes can enhance their sense of

ownership, strengthen motivation, and foster a deeper connection to the organisation's mission or purpose.

A growing body of empirical research suggests (Shekhar et al., 2025) that round-table and collaborative decision-making strategies can have a significant positive impact on staff well-being. Studies consistently report improvements in psychological health (Shekhar et al., 2025; Kim, 2022), higher levels of organisational commitment, and increased trust in leadership when employees or volunteers feel heard and actively involved in shaping outcomes. These findings highlight the potential benefits of participatory governance for creating more engaged, resilient, and empowered teams.

The governance model where everyone can thrive!

An essential dimension of round table governance is high inclusivity participatory decision making and innovation (Wang, Hou & Li, 2022), both in leadership and in working environment as well in customer services to stakeholder engagement.

One of the vital element of round-table governance is its ability to create organisational environments where people of all ages, genders, and neuro types can participate meaningfully. In contrast, many contemporary business and non-profit models continue to rely on triangular power structures (Quarterdeck, 2023) in which authority flows from the top downward. Within these hierarchical cultures, staff, volunteers, and even clients are often expected to adapt to rigid organisational norms and procedures that may not accommodate diverse needs or communication styles. Such structural inflexibility can reduce inclusivity and limit an organisation's capacity to attract and retain a broad range of talent. As a result, some organisations unintentionally develop homogenous, culture-led environments (Quarterdeck, 2023) for example, "veteran cultures" or traditionally gendered or age-skewed workforces—that replicate similar demographics and ways of thinking rather than fostering genuine diversity and innovation.

Person centred leadership enables organisations to tap into talent acquisition (Wang, Hou & Li, 2022). Organisations that practice participatory leadership naturally become more attractive to a variety of candidates including candidates from the graduate circles (Quarterdeck, 2023). When the governance structure becomes explicitly democratic, inclusive and more accommodating and communication and cognitive styles are mixed they signal a culture of belonging and psychological safety – qualities that are increasingly sought, by socially conscious candidates (Quarterdeck, 2023).

Solely traditional governance style can unintentionally exclude talented candidates and natural leaders, who may struggle with highly hierarchical structures, or whose strength do not align with conventional expectations and cultures (Quarterdeck, 2023).

In contrast participatory governance are recognises that talent comes in multiple forms, including creative- problem solving, community-insight, experience, emotional intelligence and innovative thinking. These strengths are often distributed between people, who comes from no-traditional, academic credentials, versatile generational and neurodiversity backgrounds (Shekhar et al., 2025).

Person- centred, participatory governance enables organisations to tap into a broader spectrum of talent acquisition, by reducing structural barriers and making involvement more reachable (Wang et al., 2022). Flexible meeting format, communication styles, sensory-considerate environments, participatory decision making, innovative opportunities not just affecting team members, not just increase participation but changes external attitudes towards the project as well. Participatory governance can support the organisation to be perceived as modern, progressive, innovative, and inclusive for employees, volunteers and for funding partners.

In an increasingly competitive labour and volunteer market (Uribetxebarria et al., 2021) company with visibly modern governance style can gain an increasing advantage in contrast to traditional or

`veteranian` organisations. Prospective candidates such as from the graduate circles, are increasingly looking for vocation where their perspective is valued, diversity of thoughts is welcomed, where leadership is shared rather than imposed (Uribetxebarria et al., 2021). By adopting round table governance, the company can position themselves as progressive, community rooted and responsive to societal expectations and changes all of which strengthen the recruitment pipelines.

Ultimately participatory and inclusive leadership not just strengthen internal governance and culture but it widens the companies' reach, enrichen its pool of natural leaders, and unlocks talent acquisition that conceivably unrecognised or lost in traditional governance. By doing so the company aligns organisational values with modern expectation, of fairness, accessibility, innovation, inclusivity, making the organisation to a more attractive place to work and fund.

Limitations and Potential Challenges of Round-Table Governance

Although, round table governance does advocate for a truly inclusive environment however, it has its own limitations. When compared to traditional hierarchical structures, participatory governance can present several operational challenges that organisations must thoughtfully manage.

Round Table governance it's a powerful model however, creates real world challenges, that can put strain on decision making and outcomes. Decision, when everyone is involved can put time pressure (Agbodzakey, 2024) on the group and can drift off from the subject. In the other hand in hierarchical structures decision making is faster paced and can commit to deliverance to deadlines better.

Consensus based decision making can encourage participation and participant can feel a certain ownership and responsibility towards, the project which raises enthusiasm however, personalities, ideas, cultures, and beliefs can clash and cause real life conflict (Whelan, 2024). In hierarchical structures management staff makes the quiet calls means conflict is dealt with confidentiality, however, in a consensus, conflicts would be out in the open in a group setting, can turn into personal issue and in radical cases creates a `decision gridlock` and legislative stalemate (Whelan, 2024).

Although, round table governance has many positive aspects to create an inclusive environment, success would be dependent on facilitative leadership which predominantly unchartered in professional circles.

In a more traditional governance responsibility falls on the designated decision makers however, in a consensus-based governance this line would be more blurred, such as final word, deliverance or who signs it off. These conflict based complication can really strain decision making and can create superfluous tension based biases.

Participatory governance it used in activism such as Occupy! and XR rebellion (Agbodzakey, 2024), and by modern companies and grassroots project, thereby, is lacking experience, and proficient research in existing structures, opposed to traditional leadership which have an extensive legacy (House of Lords, 2017)

Discussion:

Participatory governance reflects a growing alignment with contemporary values such as inclusivity, intergenerational collaboration, innovative talent acquisition, and transparency toward both internal and external stakeholders. These qualities make it increasingly attractive for modern non-profit organisations seeking to remain relevant in a rapidly changing social landscape. However, the same characteristics that make participatory models desirable also introduce practical challenges. Broader involvement in decision-making increases the likelihood of open conflict, intensifies time pressures, and can slow organisational responsiveness. For participatory governance to function effectively,

organisations often require a hybrid approach that introduces facilitative leadership and structured communication processes to prevent personal conflicts from escalating in group settings.

Traditional governance holds an extensive legacy of leadership and organisational management. Early charitable structures closely resembled those found in today's public sector bodies, reflecting hierarchical arrangements that have been refined over centuries. As a result, traditional governance benefits from well-established practices, accumulated institutional knowledge, and regulatory familiarity. In contrast, modern participatory governance remains relatively new and in some respects still operates in a pilot phase, with fewer long-term models to draw upon.

However, participatory governance does not seek to replace traditional trustee-led systems but rather to complement and to bring new structural reform and changes in policies and procedures. Traditional governance offers stability, legal accountability, and a wealth of leadership expertise, while participatory approaches provide progression, innovation, and responsiveness to societal expectations. When combined, these approaches create a more balanced and resilient governance model.

Integrating traditional leadership structures with consensus-based decision-making demonstrates an organisation's commitment to continuous development and adaptive practice. Such hybrid models support experimentation with new governance approaches while maintaining a secure framework for accountability. They can also expand workforce versatility by attracting graduate talent, surfacing natural leaders within the organisation, and building cultures of shared responsibility. By blending the strengths of both governance traditions, organisations can position themselves as dynamic, progressive, and aligned with modern expectations while preserving the stability necessary for long-term impact.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest relating to the research, writing, or publication of this paper. No financial, organisational, or personal interests have influenced the analysis, arguments, or conclusions presented in this work.

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