

Trustee Profile

Fiona Hughes | Senior Associate



- Trustee, The Friendly Trust

Describe your journey and what motivated you to take on these roles?

My route to the trustee position came through a colleague who mentioned that a connection of theirs was actively recruiting for new trustees, so I got in touch with the director and co-ordinator of the trust to explore it further. I had an informal meeting with the director, then I was invited to make a formal application, which led to an interview with the existing board, and I then had an invitation to join the board. The process took about 4 months.

I decided that I would like to take on a volunteer trustee role and then had been looking for the right role for me for some time before I approached the Friendly Trust. I wanted to get involved with an enterprise which could draw on my experience of financial services disputes and which was some form of advocacy for individuals did not have resources or ability to make representations for themselves. I think it is vitally important to the local community and to society to share the skills I have built and developed in my professional training and experience, and to use them for the benefit of those without a voice.

Can you describe the mission of your charity and its impact?

The Friendly Trust helps vulnerable people with their money. It works with people who have disabilities, or disabling illnesses, their families, and carers to enable them to manage their money more effectively and works to end the distress and isolation caused by poverty, abuse, and debt.

This mission is delivered by providing accessible information and personalised, practical help to help people become more financially independent. Some of the practical activities include help managing money and debt, supporting individuals through acting as Appointee to claim benefits and acting as court-appointed Deputy to make financial decisions, advising (and managing) on financial planning, wills and trusts, and on lasting power of attorneys.

The Trust is responsible for millions of pounds in bank accounts for people in the South Wales area. It makes a real and tangible difference to people's lives by reducing anxiety, offering a reliable and secure advice service, helping to reclaim independence and improving the quality and security of people's lives.

[The Friendly Trust](#)

What's your primary role and what skills or experiences do you bring to it?

My primary role as a trustee is to sit on board meetings, to make decisions on the running of the business and to get involved so far as possible in the development of the Trust. Board meetings are held five times a year and meet to advise on everything the Friendly Trust does. Trustees share responsibility for the company, making sure that it is being managed effectively, efficiently, ethically, equitably and sustainably.

It's not just limited to joining meetings. Trustees can take an active role in other areas of trust administration. Fundraising and advocacy tasks are encouraged.

My background and legal training allows me to be a first point of contact by the directors on any potentially difficult queries from third parties or funders, or on any conflict situations. I can help to understand and translate the governance requirements to the wider board, and to sign post at an early stage when issues may become contentious to avoid escalation.

Are there any notable themes specifically which cause more issues than others?

Budgeting and funding decisions always invoke strong reactions at meetings. The Friendly Trust's income comes from a variety of sources, but some large income streams come from certain contracts which could be withdrawn at a moment's notice. There can be a commercial tension between protecting business relationships and maintaining the high standards of support for service users. This is why the board of trustees is so critical to ensure an independent and ethical oversight.

How do you balance your trustee responsibilities with your professional and personal life?

From having a trustee role in the past and being treasurer of a different type of charity, I was very aware of the time the role can take up and the commitment that I would be making before I joined. All trustees are volunteers with other full time working roles, and meetings are arranged to ensure the best availability of each attendee. Attendance can be remote or in person. I am lucky to live very close to the office premises where board meetings are held and have some flexibility in my own work to attend meetings which are held just before the end of the working day.

There is often a lot of paperwork and pre-reading to digest in preparation for board meetings, which I usually do in the evenings when I get time to myself.

What lessons have you learned along the way?

I have learned that the role is much wider than I anticipated, and that even the smallest decisions can have the widest repercussions, so each item for discussion deserves proper assessment and consideration of the impact.

Professionally, I continue to learn a huge amount from the practical management of a business and the way that decision making is effectively carried out, and this has impacted on my day-to-day work in the dispute resolution arena. I can anticipate how problems will arise and how they may be diffused, and what sort of governance set up is likely to be problematic in the future.

What advice would you give your young self?

I would encourage individuals who are looking at options for trustee roles not to think "it's not for people like me" because charities value a mix of diversity, social backgrounds and different life experiences at board level. As long as you have time to dedicate and a real enthusiasm, then this will get you a firm foot on the ladder.

What are your hopes for the future of your charity? How do you see your role evolving?

The Friendly Trust has just taken on a new management team and some new trustees, so I am looking forward to seeing what contributions everyone will make and I am expecting to see some real and positive changes to help the charity move forward. I would like to be involved in helping the charity establish strong foundations and a robust framework to thrive and develop even after I am no longer involved.