



RNIB

Lessons in oversight: what can we learn from the RNIB?

An article from GGI

Enabling change through good governance improvement

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GGI CEO Professor Andrew Corbett-Nolan looks at some of the 2020 Charity Commission inquiry into the RNIB, which is noted as having important governance lessons for the charity sector around board composition skills.

In 2018, the Charity Commission for England and Wales launched a statutory inquiry into The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) following serious safeguarding failures at one of its schools. Although the presenting issue was around safeguarding, the investigation has acted as a litmus test around board composition and skills, particularly for charities with memberships and partly elected boards.

The final report, published in 2020, highlighted significant governance and management shortcomings that had a direct impact on the safety and well-being of vulnerable individuals under RNIB's care.



Why this matters

The RNIB 2020 Charities Commission Inquiry offers important lessons for all charities and also for the board governance of membership organisations, such as professional societies.

It highlights the risks of an under-skilled and overly elected board in a complex service-providing charity. The failure to ensure sufficient expertise and appropriate governance structures resulted in harm to beneficiaries and financial losses.

The recommendations emphasise a shift towards greater board professionalism, with a better balance between elected and appointed trustees to ensure robust oversight and accountability.

One key recommendation was reducing the number of elected trustees from 50% of the RNIB board to 25%, with skills-based appointments to the remaining 75% of board places.

Main governance findings

The inquiry identified the following:

- **Deficiencies in RNIB's governance structures**, which allowed safeguarding concerns to persist over an extended period. Trustees were found to have failed in their duty of oversight, relying too heavily on executive leadership without adequately scrutinising the charity's operations. The board had a culture of passively accepting reports and failing to react to red flags, including repeated regulatory failures at the RNIB Pears Centre.
- The RNIB board suffered from a **skills deficit**, particularly in safeguarding and the oversight of regulated services. No trustees had direct experience of managing regulated establishments catering to children and adults with complex needs. A lack of trustee turnover and renewal meant the board failed to adapt to changing risks and challenges.
- RNIB's governance structure required that at least 75% of trustees must be blind or partially sighted and 50% were elected meaning that the board **was limited in appointing non-visually impaired trustees with expertise in key areas** such as safeguarding and regulatory oversight. The inquiry recommended that the number of elected trustees be reduced to 25% with 75% appointed on a purely skills-based basis.
- A **lack of proper training** for RNIB trustees. Many trustees did not fully understand their legal responsibilities or how to effectively oversee safeguarding risks. This knowledge gap contributed to a failure to challenge executive decisions or intervene when concerns arose.
- RNIB's **governance model over-relied on second-tier governance bodies**, such as the Places Board (2014-2017) and the Services Steering Group (2017-2018). These committees lacked expertise, met infrequently, and had limited authority unclear lines of accountability and poor internal reporting mechanisms. The Commission found that safeguarding concerns were not escalated effectively to the board, and trustees were often unaware of the full extent of the issues.
- That RNIB **lacked the necessary checks and balances** to identify governance weaknesses before they became critical. The absence of proactive compliance monitoring meant that safeguarding failures persisted unnoticed for too long. Between November 2016 and September 2017, there was no formal governance body providing oversight of the charity's regulated establishments. Large charities delivering regulated services need trustees with direct expertise in areas such as safeguarding, regulatory compliance and risk management.

Good practice points from the Charity Commission

Continuous learning and development

The Charity Commission's guidance on trustee duties stresses the importance of continuous learning and development. Trustees must be equipped with the right skills and knowledge to fulfil their roles effectively. Regular training should cover legal responsibilities, safeguarding, financial oversight, and risk management. Trustee induction programs and ongoing governance development should be mandatory.



Inquiry lessons

The main learning points for other charities, and indeed more broadly for the governance of membership organisations too, are around **skills-based boards that operate at the right level of seniority and as separate to management.**

This is a particular challenge where organisations have memberships, such as professional societies, and have traditionally elected some or all of their board members. Where membership is a key service of the charity, for example around professional registration, being a 'member' may in itself may be an important skills and experience element for the board. However, the RNIB, like many charities, was an organisation with a membership but whose board had been largely appointed by election from the membership.

The issue that brought the RNIB to the attention of the Charity Commission was around safeguarding and the RNIB's failure to implement and maintain effective safeguarding policies. The Charity Commission reported that children and young people at RNIB Pears Centre suffered harm due to systemic weaknesses in safeguarding arrangements, leading to an unacceptable risk to their wellbeing. This unearthed, however, weakness in board composition, skills and oversight that has wider learning for the whole sector.

Valuable information through structured reporting

Effective charities implement structured reporting mechanisms that ensure trustees receive timely and accurate information. The Charity Governance Code highlights the need for well-documented decision-making, transparent reporting structures, and a culture of accountability where concerns are escalated and addressed appropriately.

Ethical obligation

The RNIB Inquiry highlights the risks of an under-skilled and overly elected board in a complex service-providing charity. The failure to ensure sufficient expertise and appropriate governance structures resulted in harm to beneficiaries and financial losses.

The recommendations emphasise a shift towards greater board professionalism, with a better balance between elected and appointed trustees to ensure robust oversight and accountability.

The inquiry underscores the profound impact of governance failures on charitable organisations and their beneficiaries.

Ensuring robust governance and safeguarding practices is not just a regulatory requirement—it is an ethical obligation.

Active engagement to build understanding

The Charity Governance Code recommends that boards ensure they have a clear understanding of their charity's work, including the risks it faces. Effective governance requires active engagement, including regular performance assessments, external audits, and assurance mechanisms to identify and address governance weaknesses before they escalate.



Regular reviews and audits

Regular governance reviews and external audits help charities stay ahead of potential risks. Best practice includes annual governance health checks, independent safeguarding audits, and performance assessments to ensure ongoing compliance with regulatory requirements. Trustees should establish a board assurance framework that systematically reviews governance risks and mitigations.

GGI exists to help create a fairer, better world. Our part in this is to support those who run the organisations that will affect how humanity uses resources, cares for the sick, educates future generations, develops our professionals, creates wealth, nurtures sporting excellence, inspires through the arts, communicates the news, ensures all have decent homes, transports people and goods, administers justice and the law, designs and introduces new technologies, produces and sells the food we eat - in short, all aspects of being human.

We work to make sure that organisations are run by the most talented, skilled and ethical leaders possible and work to build fair systems that consider all, use evidence, are guided by ethics and thereby take the best decisions. Good governance of all organisations, from the smallest charity to the greatest public institution, benefits society as a whole. It enables organisations to play their part in building a sustainable, better future for all.



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