

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHARITY TRUSTEE

RONNIE O'TOOLE

TRUSTEE OF HUGG (HEALING UNTOLD GRIEF GROUPS)



"Being on a charity board is not about sitting above the organisation, acting like a hawk in case somebody strays out of line. It feels like a shared endeavour, that I am contributing to something bigger and better than me, helping build something that can go on helping people for years to come."

Why did you decide to join a charity board?

Throughout my life I have always been involved in some or other charity, from when I was a boy going door-to-door with my father on collections for the St. Vincent de Paul, then through a college society working with Down Syndrome youths and the elderly, and after I became a father volunteering at a local club. As I got older, I realised I could use the skills I had developed professionally as a Trustee, given the difficulty many great charities have in sourcing them. That was when, through Boardmatch, I came across HUGG and, more importantly, across Fiona, the founder and CEO.

HUGG was born from a terrible loss, Fiona's daughter Milly who died by suicide in 2016 at the age of just 11. Today, Milly would be the same age as my oldest daughter Lianne, and I was incredibly touched by her story. Not finding a suicide support group in Dublin, Milly's mother Fiona set up her own, and from there HUGG grew. Today, with a small but incredibly dedicated team, and a supportive (but challenging!) board, HUGG continues to grow and bring a range of services from a lived experience of suicide. Its main service is the provision of peer support groups to those grieving a loss by suicide across the country.

What are your typical tasks and duties on the board?

I see the duties as falling in two buckets. First, we're the governance backbone. We're the independent voice, the challenging voice, a group of dedicated professionals who can bring their varied experience and professional skills to make sure that the direction and management of HUGG is in the best interests of the service users, the staff, donors, regulators, and anyone with a stake in their success. But for a charity with a relatively small contingent of staff, our board also supports the day-to-day running of HUGG.

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What are your typical tasks and duties on the board? (continued)

Obvious 'hard' trustee skills that every charity needs are HR, finance, legal/secretarial and IT, so if you have a professional experience in these areas, you can play a vital role in some charity. My own background as an economist gave me a lot of experience reviewing strategies for non-profit bodies and conducting evaluations of Government funding schemes. I have also worked on several projects relating to the work of the Charity Regulator. This gives me a strategic perspective to planning and management, an area where I believe many Irish charities could be better on.

What has been the biggest reward or benefit in becoming a trustee?

The experience of HUGG is the first time I have been a charity trustee, and I have just passed my first year in the role. What surprised me most is that I didn't expect to feel so much part of the team. Being on a charity board is not about sitting above the organisation, acting like a hawk in case somebody strays out of line. It feels like a shared endeavour, that I am contributing to something bigger and better than me, helping build something that can go on helping people for years to come. Sometimes that's by providing practical help to Fiona and her team, sometimes it is by challenging them and asking questions. But from the first board meeting I attended, I have never felt I was anything other than one of the team.

What would you say to someone thinking about joining a charity board?

Join. Contribute. Learn. You have great skills, a knowledge built up over years, a unique life experience, and a passion to improve the world in which you live. There is a charity out there which needs your knowledge and experience if you have a few hours spare every month to provide it. You'll find yourself among similarly minded people with the same passion, though different perspectives. And you will get far more out of the experience of being part of something great than you will ever put in. If you to decide there is skill you could bring to HUGG, we'd love to talk to you.