

# **On board: How can participation on third sector boards in Scotland be increased, widened and strengthened?**

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## **Research summary**

Over 250 trustees took part in this research, sharing their experiences of being trustees, explaining how they got involved with boards, what they love and what they dislike about it, and what they thought might put others off joining a board. The research also looked at demographic data to explore whether respondents' backgrounds, age and gender had an impact on how and why they got involved. This data was also used to assess whether board diversity could be improved.

## **Key research findings**

- **Boards are not generally representative of the wider population**
- **While women are well-represented on the boards of smaller charities, the boards of larger charities tend to be male-dominated**
- **Young people are under-represented on boards, often citing time commitments and the timings of meetings as a barrier**
- **People with less formal education are very underrepresented – 76% of respondents had degrees compared with only 26% of the wider population**
- **Confidence issues and concerns about lacking the skills required on a board were cited as key barriers by those in under-represented groups.**
- **Poor promotion of opportunities, negative perceptions of boards and inaccessible language were given as further barriers.**
- **Risks to ongoing participation primarily focussed on group dynamics – poor relationships with other board members, feeling under-valued or ignored, and under-lying disagreements left undealt with were frequently raised as factors putting people off continuing their board involvement**
- **More positively, most respondents were able to resolve personal issues, and reasons for leaving boards were either practical, such as moving from the**

area, or strategic, such as feeling that they had served their time and contributed all they could.

Based on the findings and feedback from trustees, the research makes a number of recommendations in the final section.

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## 1) Background

Board diversity is widely recognised as being central to a healthy board. The Charity Commission (2005a) points out that:

“A charity with a diverse board of trustees is more likely to:

- engage effectively with the community it serves;
- respond effectively and equitably to the needs of its users; and
- increase accountability and public confidence in its work.” (p9)

‘Diversity’ is not explicitly defined by the Charity Commission, but is often used to refer to specific characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. Many third sector bodies emphasise the importance of taking a wider view of board diversity, looking at “diversity in all its forms including age, gender, faith, race, sexual orientation, disability, experience and thinking.” (NCVO’s Good Governance code, 2010, p7).

Research by the Cabinet Office (2012) found that “some [organisations] find little difficulty with general recruitment but can struggle to find trustees with specialist skills (such as legal or financial skills), and others reported difficulties with recruiting a diverse board” (p37). While third sector boards may display more diversity than public and private sector boards, based on Charity Commission data we know that while there tends to be a 50:50 split between men and women trustees in smaller organisations, this shifts to 67:33 in the larger charities (NCVO, 2012, Section 73). Many boards also find it difficult to recruit younger trustees, with less than 12% of trustees aged under 40 (Charity Commission 2010, p5).

The Charity Commission does not currently record ethnic minority data, but say that anecdotally they are underrepresented and that charities report difficulties in recruiting trustees from ethnic minorities (Charity Commission 2005a, p9). There is also no data on the socio-economic backgrounds of board members, and very little data on boards with regards to broader diversity definitions.

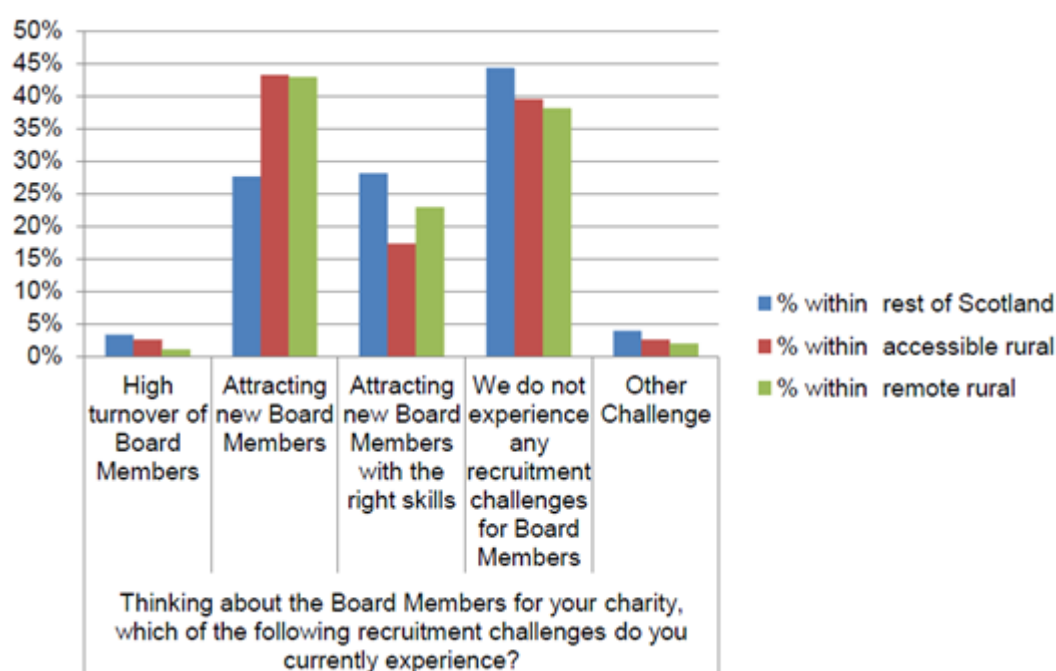
The result is that the typical UK board member is seen by the media and the general public as “a 57-year old white male” (Jackson, 2012, n.pag.) or even that boards consist of “generally white, middle-class, male trustees” (Belcher, 2004, n.pag.), but

there is very little actual data available with which to corroborate or refute this stereotype.

In addition to specific recruitment issues around diversity and more marginalised groups, the Charity Commission (2005a, p23) found that 11% of charities ‘always’ and 39% ‘sometimes’ have difficulty filling vacancies on the trustee body – in other words half of all charities reported problems filling board positions.

Volunteer Development Scotland’s (VDS) Charity Survey 2012 surveyed 592 charities on a range of volunteering issues including boards. While 44% of respondents said they do not experience any recruitment challenges, the remaining 66% do have challenges: 28% said their main issue was difficulty attracting new board members, and 28% said the main difficulty was attracting board members with the ‘right skills’.

#### Board recruitment challenges

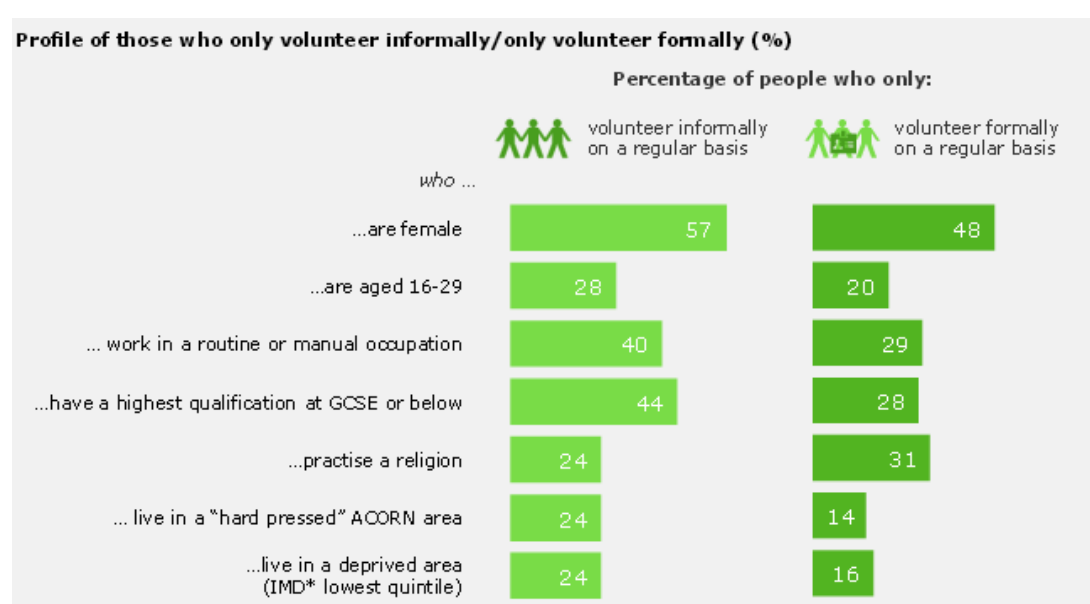


Source: Woolvin & Rutherford (2013) p26

Despite a large and active sector, the rates of participation on boards are relatively low in comparison to wider volunteering and the population as a whole. Vernon & Stringer (2009) found that 95% of people in the UK are unaware that they can support a charity by becoming a trustee: “*less than 5% of people are aware of trusteeship as a way to support a charity*” (Vernon & Stringer, 2009, p5). Two pieces of research, one

by Ipsos Mori, and the other for the Scottish Government corroborate this finding “a lack of awareness of what volunteering involves in terms of time commitment, skills and abilities as a key barrier to volunteering” (Hurley et al, 2008, p7).

Further, there seem to be significant socio-economic variations in terms of how people volunteer – the Community Life Survey of 6,915 adults in England found that: “People from managerial and professional occupations, and full-time students, are more likely to participate in regular formal volunteering than those who have never worked or who are long-term unemployed” (p8).



Source: 2012-2013 Community Life Survey (p11)

## 2) Research results

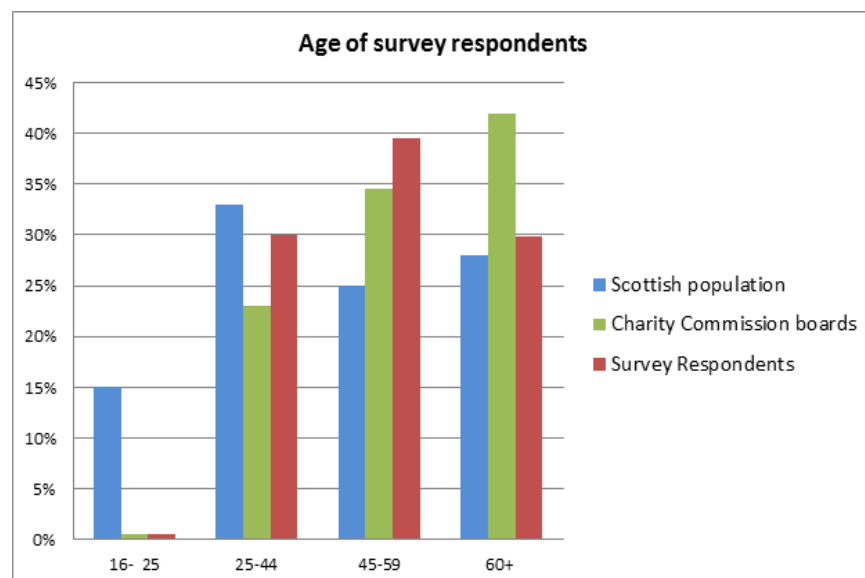
### a) Respondent profiles

#### i) Age profile

The age profile of respondents is presented below. The red column represents the survey respondents, while the blue column represents the wider Scottish population. The figure shows that younger people were not well-represented among survey respondents, while those in the age group 45-59 were over-represented. The lack of young people on boards has been noted in research such as Charity Commission,

2010. The profile of survey respondents is however closer to the wider population and less biased towards those over 60 years than the Charity Commission profile

### Age of survey respondents



Source: Comparison of survey respondent ages against Charity Commission data and Scottish Household Survey population data

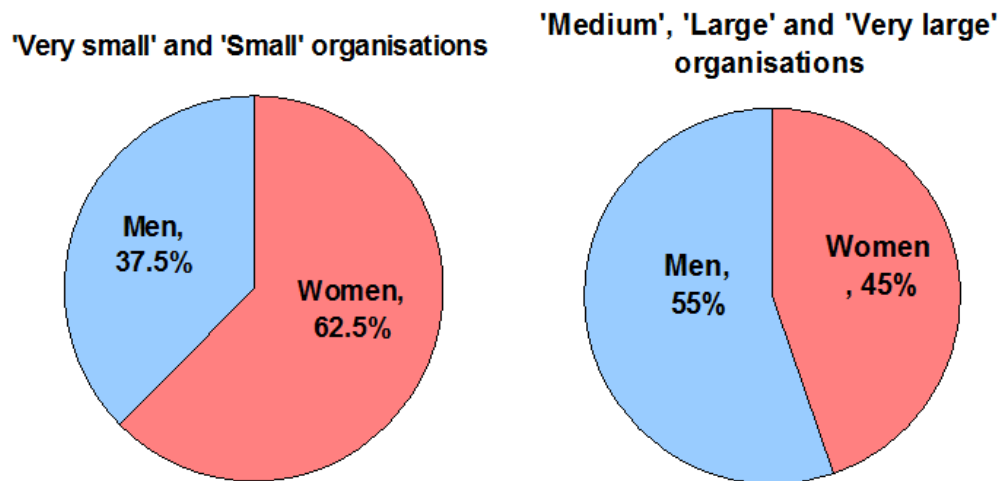
### ii) Gender

More women (109: 56%) than men (92: 44%) responded to the survey. This is fairly close to the wider Scottish population figures (52% women: 48% men) and in line with findings from the Scottish Household Survey, which show that women are more likely to volunteer than men. However, the respondent profile differs slightly from UK-wide estimates (NCVO, 2013) which suggest that marginally more men (52%) than women (48%) sit on voluntary sector boards.

### Organisation size and gender

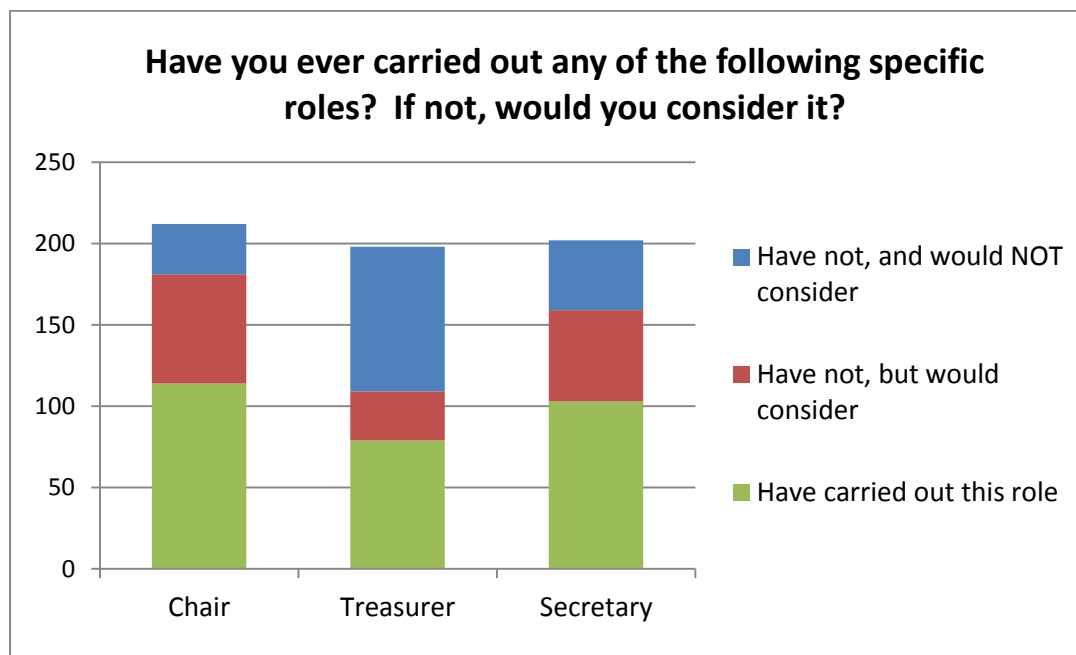
Respondents were asked about the size of the organisation they are on the board of. Most respondents volunteered with small to medium sized organisations, which reflects the size and shape of the sector. When responses were cross-tabulated against gender it would however appear that women are less-well represented on larger boards, as presented in the figure overleaf.

## Gender split on boards by organisation size



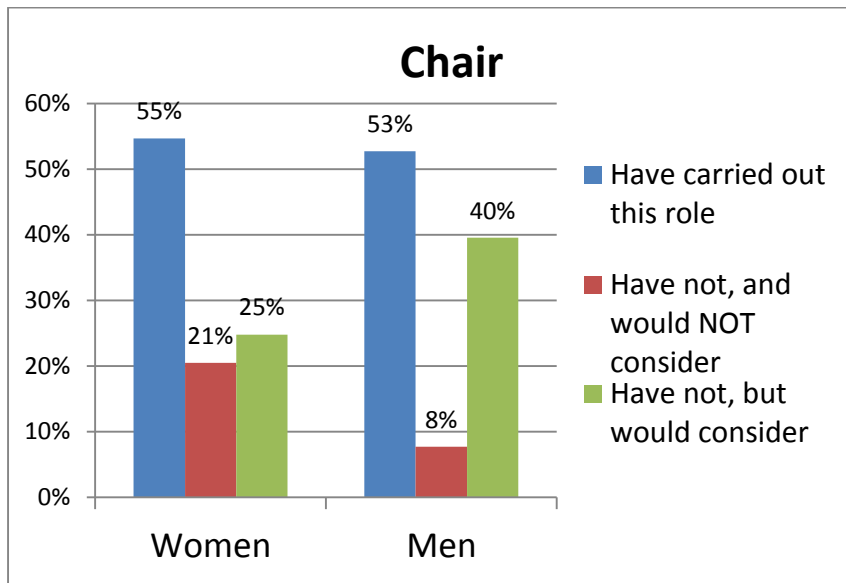
## Board roles and gender

Respondents were asked whether they had carried out any of the office bearer roles of Chair, Treasurer, or Secretary, and if they had not, would they consider it.



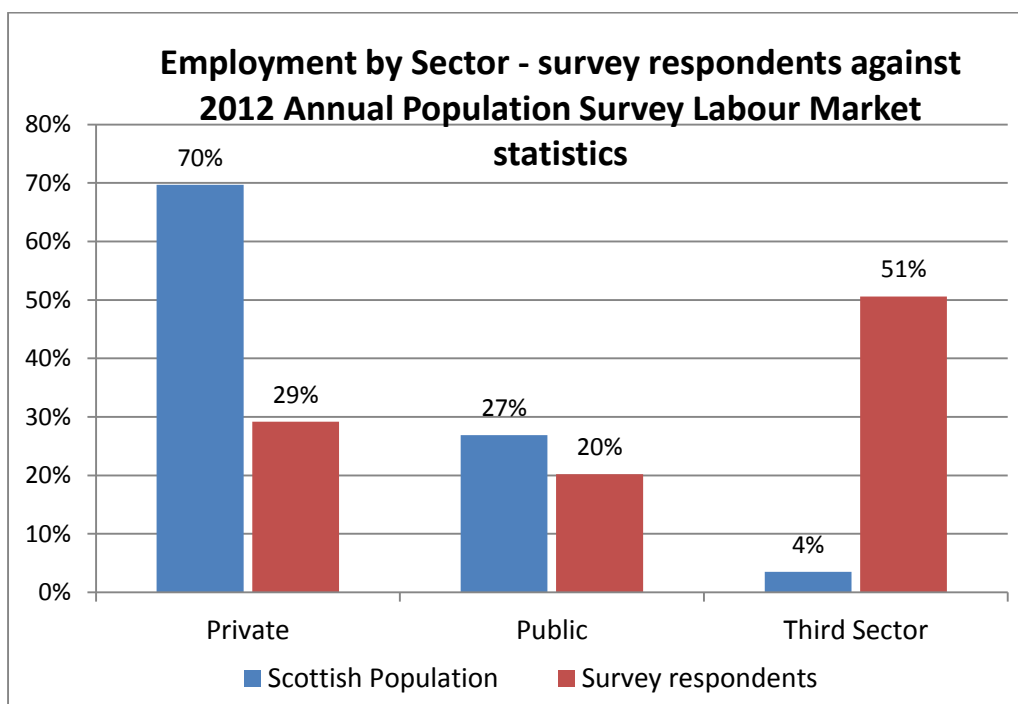
Respondents across the board were least likely to consider the role of Treasurer, often due to the mistaken belief that this role has to be carried out by a trained accountant. The other notable difference is that fewer women were likely to consider the role of Chair if they had not carried out it before. Younger women in particular cited inexperience and lack of confidence as reasons: *“Chair - because don’t have the experience or confidence (Female, 25-44)”*

### Attitudes towards Chair role by gender



### iii) Sector of work

Despite third sector employees only making up 4% of the Scottish workforce, they made up 51% of survey respondents. This unexpectedly high figure may be due to the channels used to disseminate the survey, but from comments around how people got involved with boards (fig 12) there does seem to be a link between working in the sector and participating on boards.





Source: Respondents employment Sector' compared against Annual Population Survey labour market data

*iv) Education and Income*

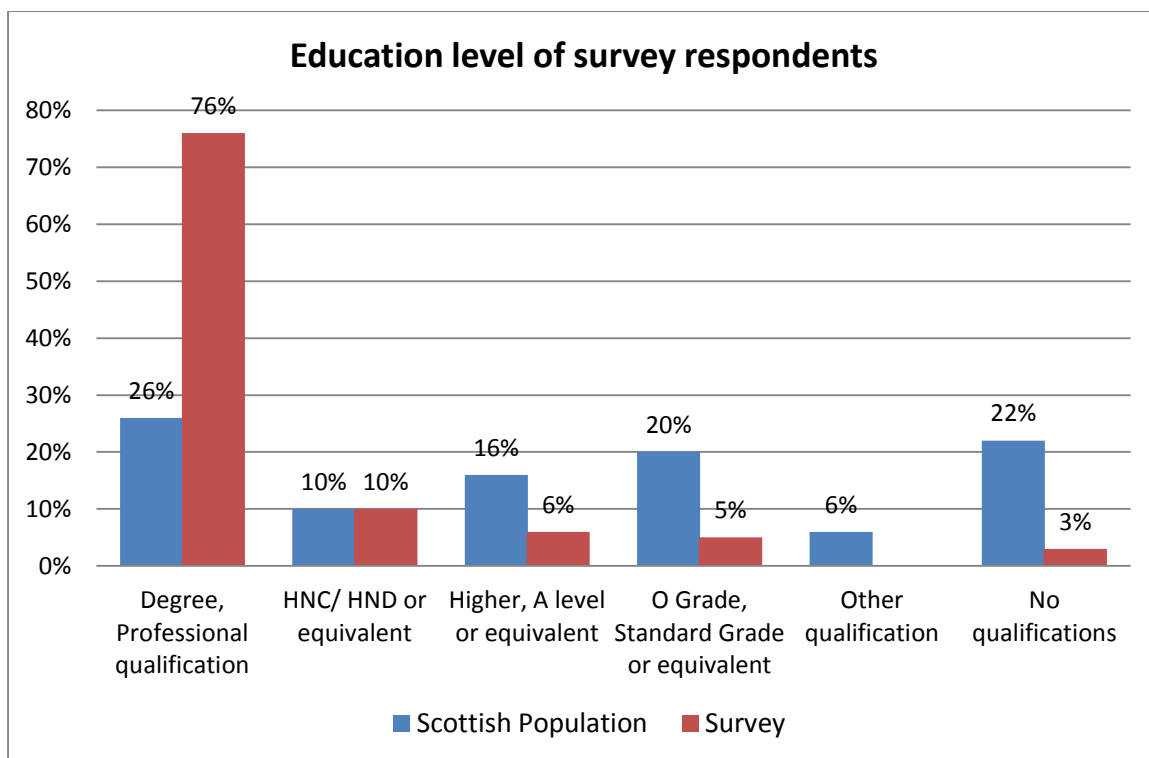
Survey respondents were extremely well-qualified in terms of formal education. 76% of respondents have a 'Degree or Professional Qualification' compared to the national average of 26%. Of that 76%:

- 30% of respondents have a 'University degree'
- 46% of respondents have a 'Professional / post-university qualification'

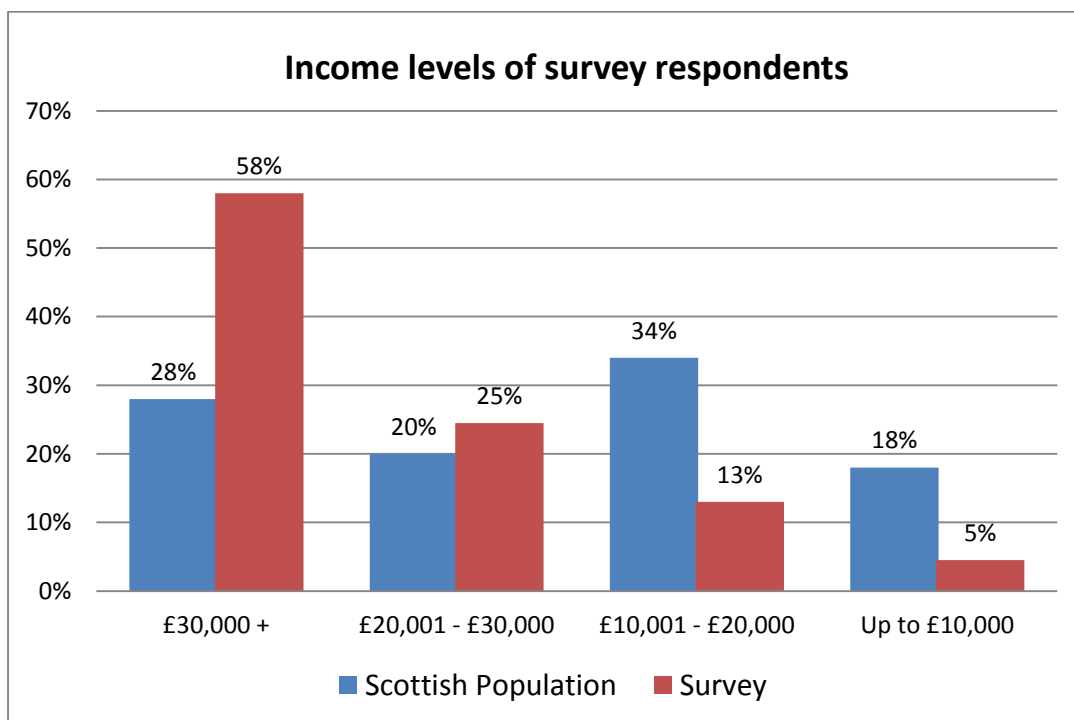
The figure below demonstrates that respondents' household incomes were significantly higher than the national average, with over half of respondent households earning over £30,000 against the Scottish average of 28% of households. While there were respondents on lower incomes, over two thirds of these were retired people. The Scottish Household Survey 2011 findings showed a bias towards better-off households and those with higher education levels being more likely to volunteer but the profile of board members based on this survey appears to be skewed even more strongly towards highly educated high earners<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Income and education levels have no correlation with the respondents' employment sector.



Source: respondent data plotted against wider population education data from



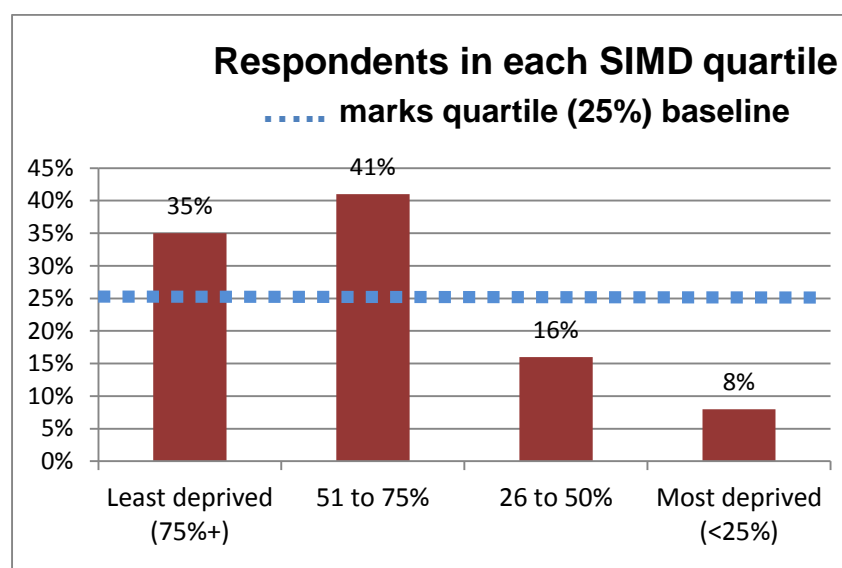
Source: Respondent incomes against wider population data from SHS

#### v) Geography of respondents

The survey received responses from a geographical spread of board members largely in line with the respondent profile for the Scottish Household Survey. Variations (higher for 'Accessible rural' and 'Remote rural') may reflect the higher levels of voluntary action in rural areas, but may be due to dissemination method. A slight bias towards affluent board members had been anticipated, and so respondents' home postcodes were checked against the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).<sup>2</sup> The figure below shows that only 24% of respondents live in the more deprived two quartiles, with only 8% living in the areas ranked as 25% most deprived.

Households	Scottish Household Survey respondents (%)	Survey respondents (%)
Large urban areas	40	37
Other urban areas	30	15
Accessible small towns	9	11
Remote small towns	4	3
Accessible rural	11	19
Remote rural	6	15
Scotland	100	100
Base	14,360	185

Source: respondents' household postcodes coded against Scottish Government's 6-way urban/rural classification

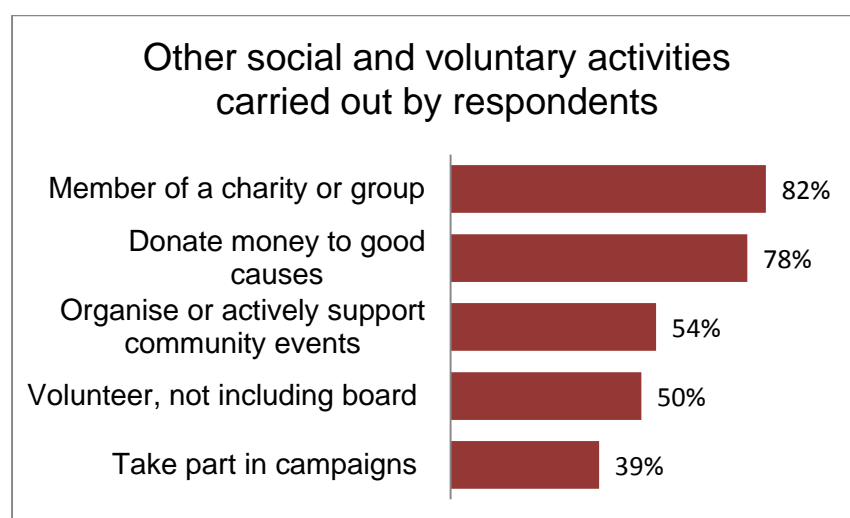


<sup>2</sup> The SIMD is a relative ranking of postcode areas based on a number of factors: income, employment, health, education, accessibility, housing and crime.

## b) Survey responses

### i) *Pathways to involvement*

The majority of respondents carried out a number of other voluntary or 'social action' activities, outlined below. The most common activity was to be a member of an organisation, which is often a prerequisite of being eligible for election to a board. Only 50% of respondents said that they volunteer outwith their board activities, highlighting that despite overlaps, board members are not simply a subset of volunteers.<sup>3</sup>



Most respondents have been involved with boards for a number of years, and the figure below shows that 58% have been involved for over 5 years.

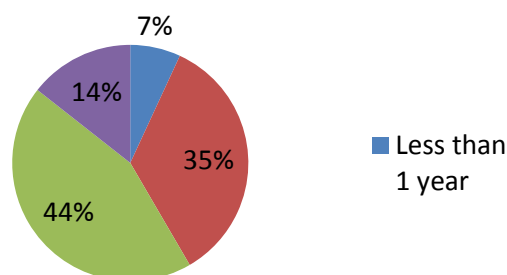
Further, almost half of board members surveyed were involved with more than one board, with **17% participating on 3 or more boards**.

Length involvement with boards

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<sup>3</sup> While 91 respondents said that they carry out four or five activities, 9 did not select any of the options given, and 27 only selected one other activity.

### Current board members: How long have you been involved with boards?



Respondents were asked ‘*How did you first get involved with boards?*’ The responses were clustered and ranked according to frequency:

### How involvement with boards started: count of respondents



86 (37%) respondents said that they got involved with boards because of an existing relationship with the organisation – for example as a member, a service user, or a parent

- which then developed into them being asked or wanting to join the board. Nearly a third of respondents (74 out of 230; 32%) reported that they were asked / invited / approached/ encouraged /persuaded to join the board. 41 (32%) respondents said that they got involved with the board through their employment, with just over half of these respondents working in the third sector. 28 respondents reported getting involved after seeing an advert, with most of these specifying an advert in the local paper.

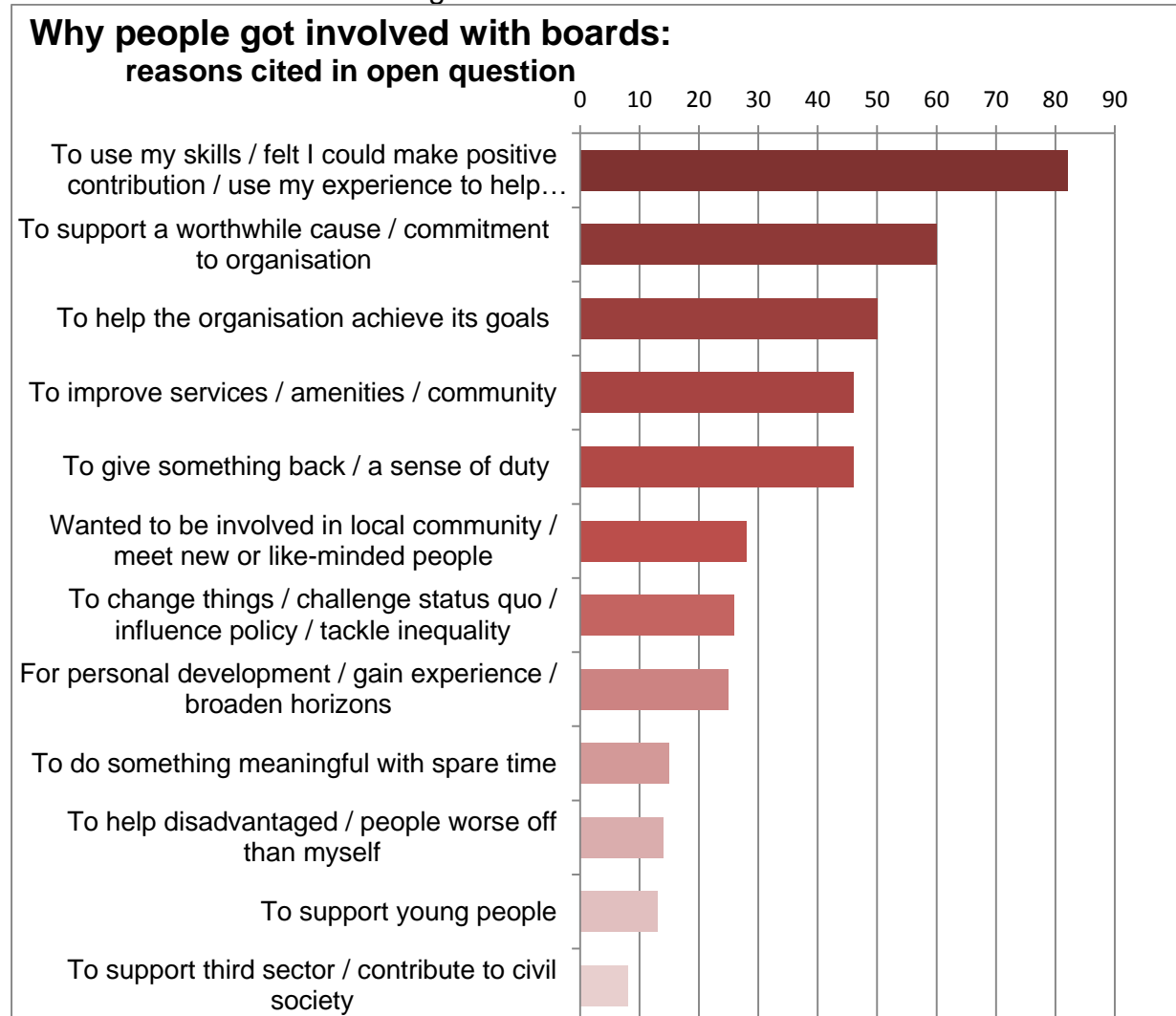
Involvement routes compared against demographic data (gender, age, income) showed only small variations. Those with a university degree were more likely to report getting involved after seeing an advert, and people with lower formal qualifications more likely to get involved as service user.

#### *ii) Motivations*

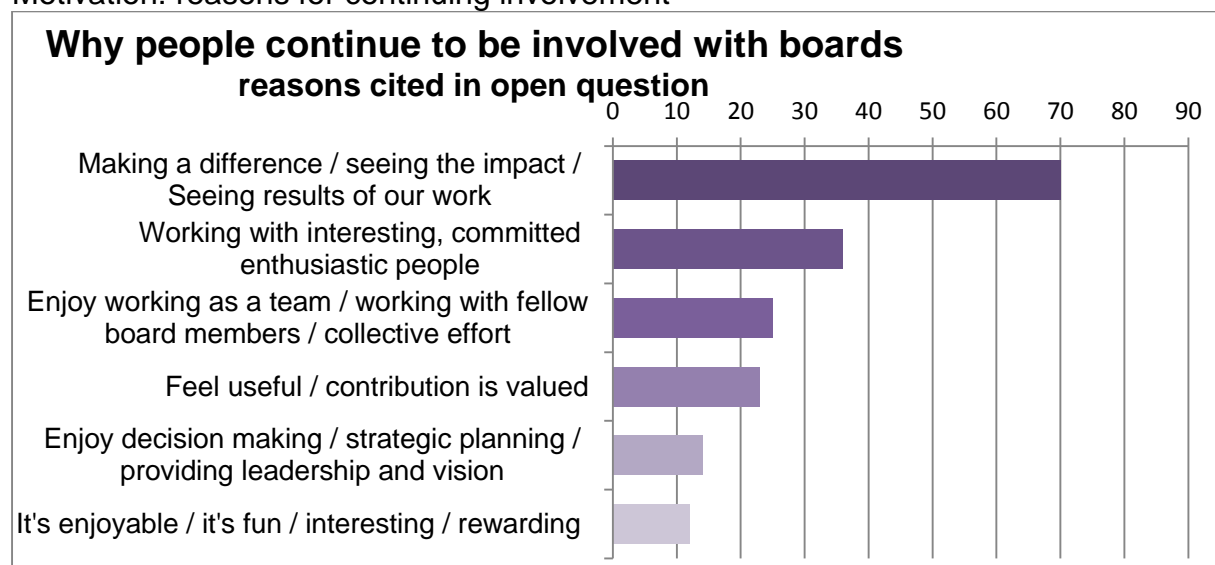
The strongest reason to emerge for respondents participating on boards was that they had skills they wanted to use or share, or had ideas or perspectives that would benefit the organisation. Most expressed a belief in their ability to make a valuable contribution: *"There was a definite need, and I had the skills to take things forward."* Other key motivating factors were: supporting an organisation or cause they believe in; helping an organisation achieve its goals; improving services and amenities; wanting to get involved with their communities and meeting new people. Some respondents wanted to change things and challenge inequalities. Very few respondents cited motives around personal gain.

A number of respondents also gave reasons for why they continue to volunteer with boards. The top theme was around the satisfaction of making an impact or seeing a real difference being made. Feeling valued was also cited as a key reason for continuing volunteering.

## Motivations: reasons for starting involvement



## Motivation: reasons for continuing involvement



### *iii) Barriers*

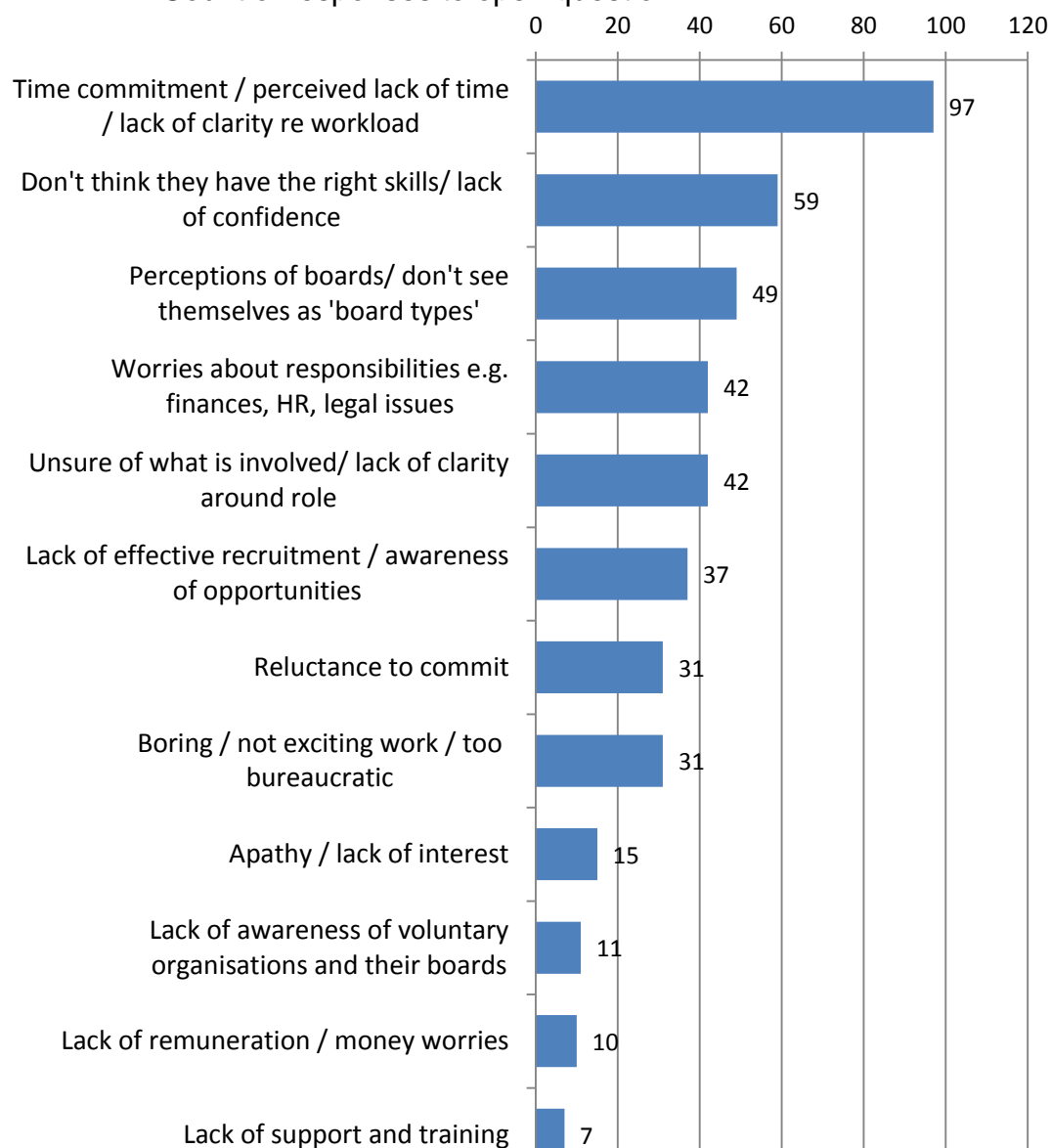
Respondents were asked to suggest reasons why people may not join boards, and then asked to rate a set of options from 'Key barrier' to 'Not a barrier'. The themes emerging from the open responses are presented below, followed by the barrier ratings. Comparing the two figures there are several points of difference. While both have 'Lack of time' as the top issue, board members were more likely to describe this as a 'perceived lack of time' or 'worries about time commitment'. Worries about responsibilities e.g. finances and legal issues were rated second highest in both questions.

In the open response themes the third highest reason given was that a large number of respondents felt that people are put off because they do not know enough about what the role involves. The fourth and fifth barriers suggested were that people do not see themselves as 'board types' or think that they do not have the right skills. Finally, another frequent reason given was that advertising is poor and people do not know what opportunities are available.



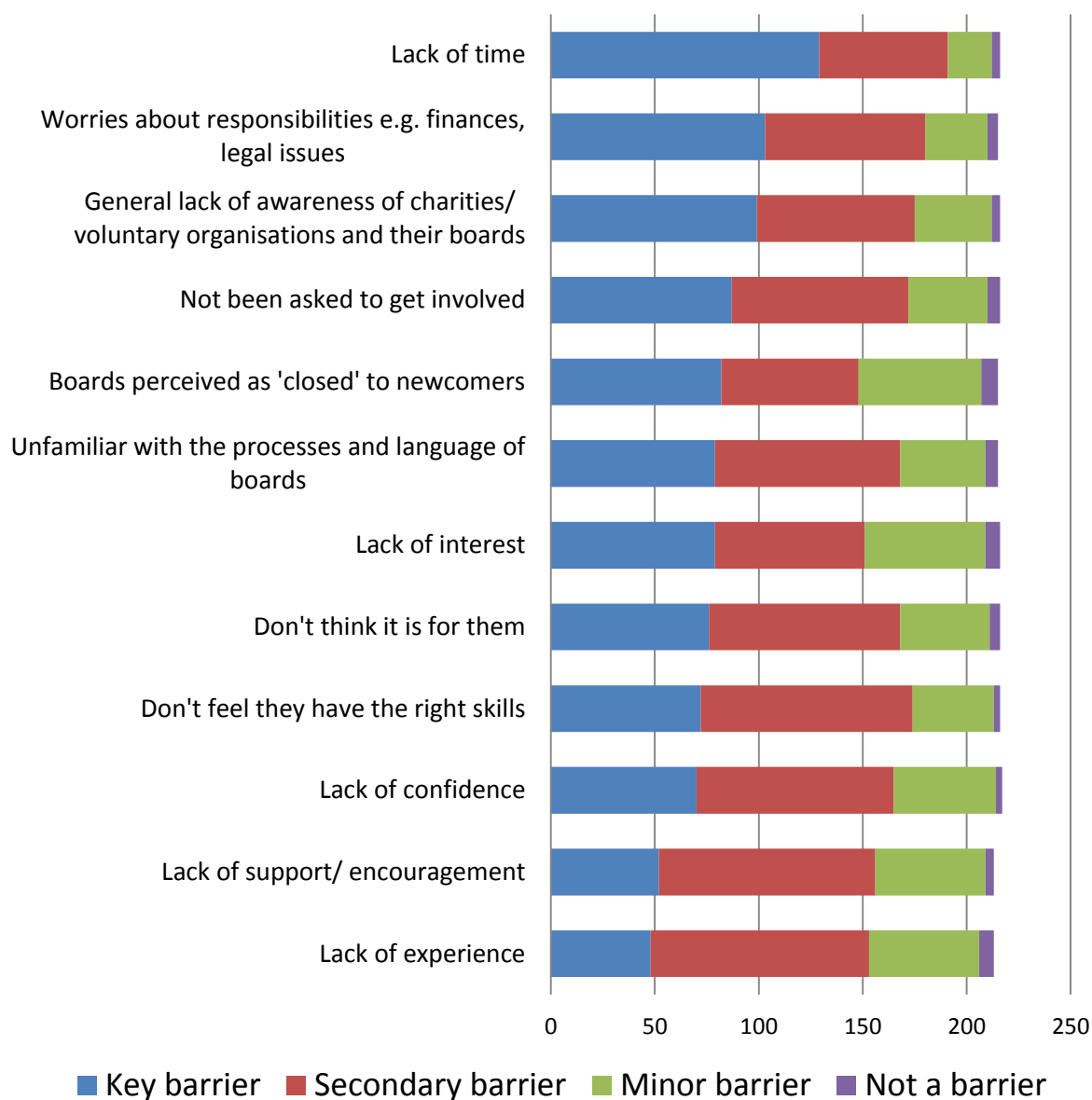
## Potential barriers to participation of others

Count of responses to open question



### To what extent do you think the following are barriers stopping people joining a board?

Respondent count, sorted by 'Key barrier'

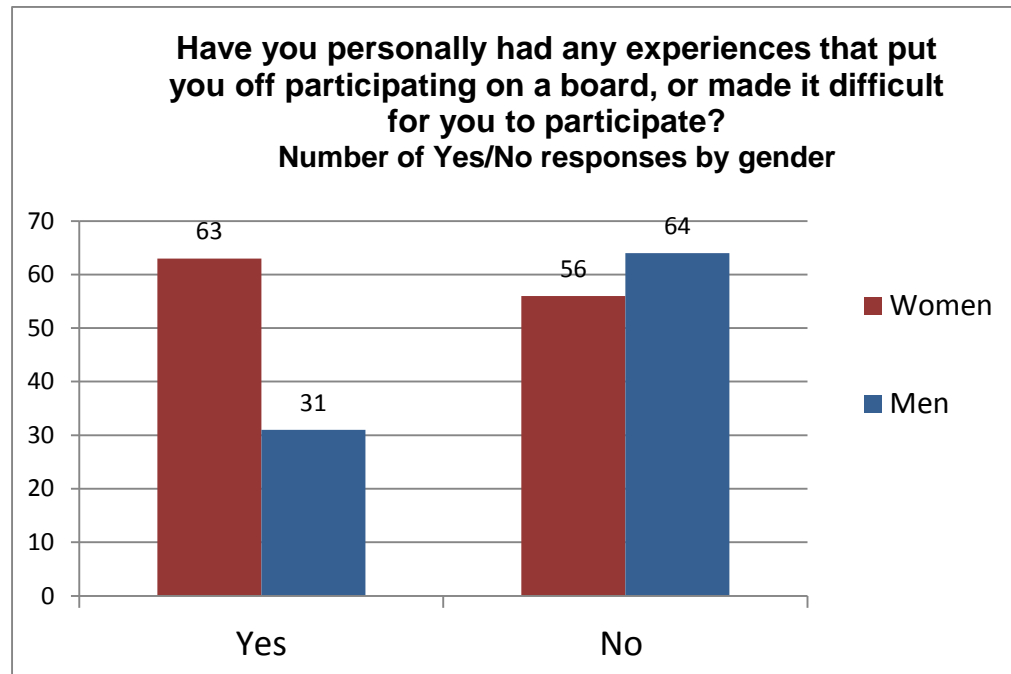


#### iv) Off-putting experiences

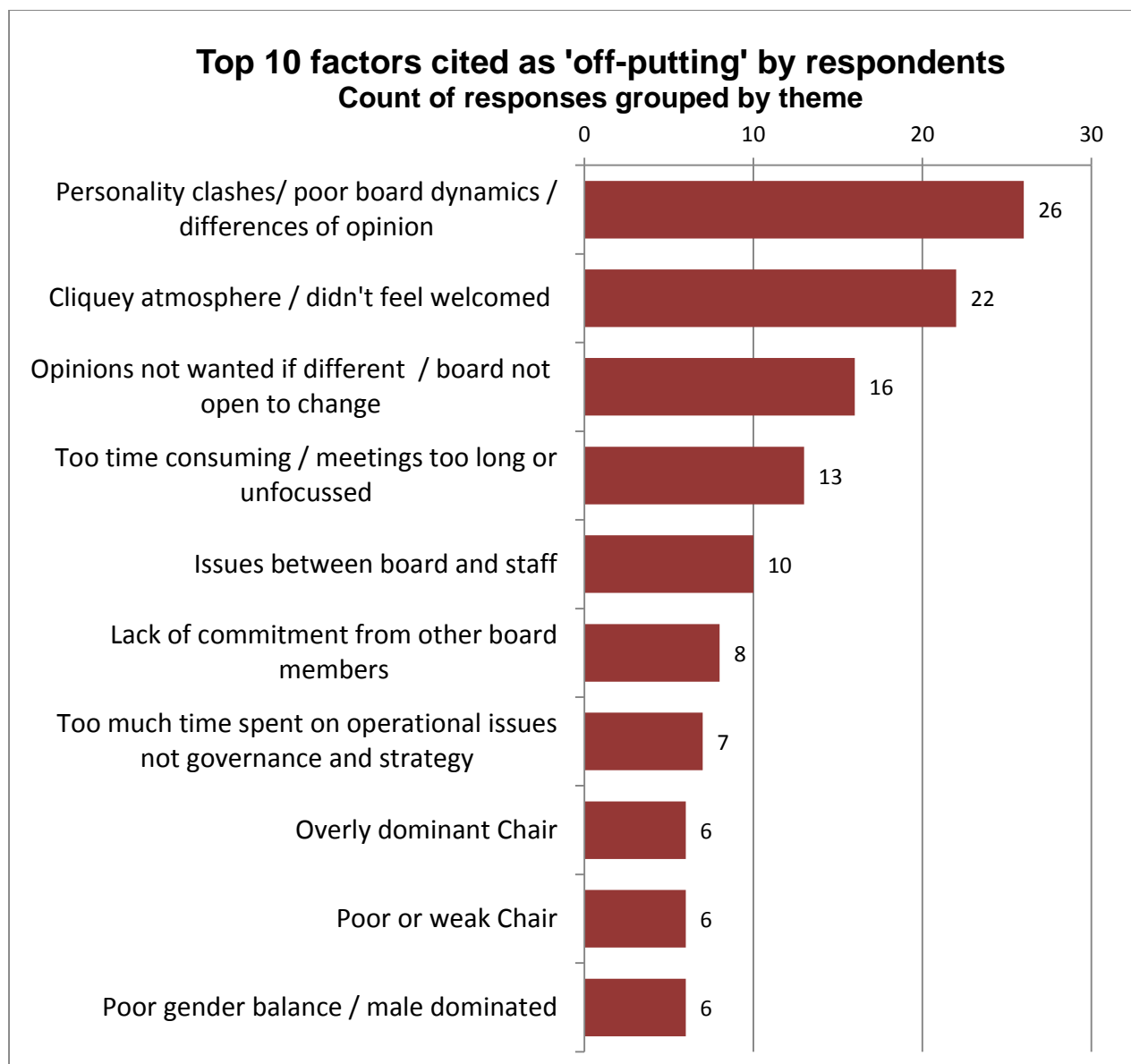
Around two fifths of respondents reported personally having had experiences that put them off participating on boards, with women being significantly more likely to have had off-putting experiences than men. Fig 24 illustrates that 53% of women (64 respondents) said they had against only 33% of men (31 respondents). In the

main, the reasons given by women as off-putting tended to focus on poor board dynamics or poor gender balance.

#### Off-putting experiences by gender



#### Top 10 off-putting factors



In total, 98 respondents provided comments on experiences or factors which had personally put them off boards, which were broken down into 143 separate factors. The key themes to emerge have been pulled together in Fig 25 above. Most comments concerned the dynamics of boards, either between the board members themselves, between the Chair and the board, or between the board and the paid staff or CEO of the organisation. Personality clashes were cited frequently. In addition, eight respondents specifically used the word 'clique' or 'cliquey', and others said they had not been made to feel welcome by the other board members. As well as issues around male-dominated boards, several younger respondents mentioned not being made to feel welcomed by older or longer-serving board members.

A number of respondents' comments focussed on time issues – primarily citing long, poorly chaired meetings and too much time spent on operational instead of strategic issues.

*v) Factors leading to resignations*

In total, respondents suggested 191 reasons for other board members stepping down – table 4. Mostly respondents felt that other board members had underestimated the time commitment required, and had not fully understood what their role would involve. Other key factors put forward tended to be external reasons: changes in personal circumstances, increased pressure and commitments at work, ill health, and people moving away from the area. These findings are in line with reasons given for stopping volunteering (Hurley et al 2008). Personality clashes, disagreements and tensions around the organisation's priorities were also cited, although these factors have not been reported other research.

Top 10 resignation reasons for others

Top 10 reasons given for others resigning	Count
Didn't anticipate the time commitment involved / unable to commit time to carry out role well	36
Concerns / tension over direction organisation is taking	17
Personality clashes /disagreements with board, CEO or Chair	17
Changes in personal circumstances, inc. work and family commitments / ill health / moving out of area	15
Deciding role isn't for them / differences of opinion about role	16
Conflicts of interest	7
People feeling they've done their stint	6
Not feeling listened to / not getting their voice heard / not getting their way	6
Difficulty attending meetings (travel, day-time or evening meetings)	5
People showed interest but left - not sure why	5

Top 10 resignation reasons for respondents

Top 10 reasons given for respondent resigning	Count
Felt I had contributed as much as I could / done my bit/ had my turn	16
Organisation and board needed new blood / fresh ideas	15
Changes in personal circumstances: moved away from area / work / family commitments / getting older	15
Unable to commit enough time to carry out role well so stepped down	13
Too many other commitments: other interests, family, work	12
Did not feel contribution was valued / not listened to	10
Disagreement with Chair or other board members / tension over direction organisation was taking	12
Wanted change of direction/ focus on other things	8
Difficulty attending meetings (travel, day-time or evening meetings)	5
Disagreements with staff / board not respected by staff	5

### *Resignation reasons*

93 respondents gave a total of 121 reasons for why they personally had resigned, or in several cases were planning to resign in the near future – table 5. Many respondents felt that they had made their contribution and that it was time to step down. In many cases they felt they had been there too long and should let someone else take their place. Despite poor board dynamics and personality clashes being raised as something which had put many respondents off board work, relatively few people gave this as an actual reason for resigning.

### 3) Discussion

In this section, the findings of the research are discussed. First, to assess what the research has discovered about board members, their diversity and their representativeness of the wider population. Second, to examine to what extent current board member recruitment methods, motivations and barriers might have an impact on board participation and diversity.

#### a) Representativeness and diversity

*“Some Boards may only look to recruit more of the same, rather than value diversity and different life experiences”*

From the research evidence outlined in the literature review, boards can struggle to recruit new board members. From the findings and wider research, it would also appear that current board members are not as diverse or as representative of the wider population as they could be. Age, gender, socio-economic status and education levels appear to affect the propensity to volunteer for boards:

- Young people are less likely to volunteer for boards
- Women are less well-represented on larger boards, and many report experiencing barriers to participation
- Formal education levels of respondents were significantly higher than the Scottish average
- Respondents' household income levels were significantly higher than the Scottish average
- Respondents tend to live in less deprived areas (as defined by the SIMD)

These findings are consistent with findings that older people and those with higher level of income and education are more likely to volunteer (Table 1). Trustees are on boards in order to support the interests of the whole organisation and should not be recruited only to represent a specific sub-group or for the sake of tokenism.

However, a range of perspectives and a good balance of skills and experience are viewed as key to a successful board (NCVO 2010). This balance should aim to ensure that board members fully represent the views and voices of the community or membership from which they have been elected and so it is important to identify

what barriers might be preventing wider participation. Respondents suggested a number of potential practical, social and cultural barriers to participation. The following sections will therefore explore possible reasons for this lack of diversity and varying levels of participation from certain groups, looking at potential practical barriers as well as possible social/ cultural explanations.

## **b) Barriers to initial participation**

### *i) Perceptions of boards*

#### *Poor public awareness of boards*

*“Many people don’t understand what a board is and do not come across boards in any other context so it would not be an obvious thing to do.”*

A lack of awareness of voluntary organisations and their boards was ranked as the 3rd greatest barrier to participation – and poor levels of awareness has also been highlighted by others including Sealy et al (2009). It is therefore essential that boards aim to both increase awareness of boards, and also tackle perceptions and misconceptions around boards and the role of board members.

#### *Negative perceptions of boards*

From respondents’ comments, boards have an ‘image problem’ which may put off a wide range of people, particularly younger people:

*“Perception is a huge issue - Many people were surprised as someone under 30 that I was on a board of a company. Many boards are still perceived as the domain of the 50+ white male.”*

*“Perception that Boards are populated by white, middle aged, middle class, retired men.”*

Further, one of the few respondents to live in the most deprived quartile based on the SIMD, who had no formal qualifications suggested that this perception particularly around the ‘middle-class’ image may contribute to putting off people from



other socio-economic backgrounds: “They do not feel they are in the same social standing/class”

It is therefore imperative that boards not only aim to increase diversity but also publicise that they can be and want to be diverse by presenting images which challenge preconceptions.

#### *Board work perceived as boring*

A number of respondents suggested that another perception issues is that “*Board and committee work perceived as boring.*” 31 respondents pointed out board work could be viewed as unexciting, and that “*Meetings are not for everyone!*” or that boards can consist of “*too many boring meetings, not enough 'real' engagement*” and several respondents suggested that people may prefer to volunteer in other ways: “*It's not exciting and interesting work - it's much more fun to volunteer with the kids or animals or play in the band, sing in the choir etc.*” This perception of board work as dull may explain why many groups including younger people, who are as likely to participate in wider volunteering as other age groups (Scottish Household Survey, 2012, Figure 12.2) are less well-represented on boards. However, while it does have to be recognised that board work might not appeal to everyone, many people do enjoy it and the satisfaction they get from it. Focussing on these more enjoyable aspects may challenge perceptions, and may make board work more appealing to a wider audience. One respondent commented that a key barrier is:

*“A misunderstanding about what's really required (...) There need to be some good stories worked up and told in interesting ways of why being a board member is interesting.”*

#### *ii) Poor awareness of requirements of board roles*

##### *Time Commitment*

The key factor cited throughout the survey as a barrier to participation was the time commitment. Respondents ranked time as by far the most significant barrier and time-related issues were cited as the top reason for others resigning from boards. This is consistent with research into barriers to social action (Cabinet Office, 2013) and

barriers to starting or continuing with volunteering (Hurley et al, 2008). However, while there is unavoidably a time commitment, most responses to this survey focussed on the wider public being unclear about the time commitment, or simply perceiving they do not have the time, or being “*worried it might be time consuming*”. Further, a number of respondents noted that differences between board members’ expectations and the time they have to give can cause tensions, particularly between young and working-age people, and retired people

*“It is hard being the young un, when most members are retired - you can be patronised and time feels at a premium that some (certainly not all!) retired people don’t appreciate.”*

Many respondents felt that many boards, particularly of smaller organisations, spend too much time on operational activities instead of governance work, or expect board members to spend time carrying out other volunteering – see fig 24. The same graph also shows a number of respondents criticising long and ‘rambling’ meetings, particularly off-putting to younger and working age people. Differing expectations around time commitments required were often cited as key sources of tension. As well as better chairing of meetings with shorter agendas there is evidently a need for boards to be clearer about roles and the time commitment expected, and to recognise that not all board members can commit the same amount of time. Not only will this help with recruitment and widening participation initially, but will also reduce the number of people dropping out at a later stage due to the time commitment being more than expected.

### *Skills*

The VDS research indicates that out of the 58% of organisations which had difficulty recruiting board members, half said that it was a issue recruiting people with ‘the right skills’. But what are the ‘right’ skills?

There is evidence that getting the right mix of skills is essential to a well-managed organisation. The research findings show that having skills was the main motivate people to join a board. However, having too narrow a focus on certain types of skills can act as a barrier. Many respondents suggested that a perceived lack of skills is a key barrier to participation:

*“Lack of awareness of what is required. Thinking that to be a Board Member, you need experience and skills that a 'normal' person wouldn't have.”*

Respondents also noted that they often participated through work. Whilst there was a focus on ‘professions’ there is an opportunity to look beyond accountancy and law, and look at engaging with people working in many other fields who have transferrable skills.

It is often suggested that organisations looking to recruit board members carry out a Skills Audit, as this can help not only identify gaps but address diversity. However, many of the skills audit templates recommended as good practice appear to be geared towards the requirements of larger, more ‘professional’ organisations. A sample template has been included in Appendix 4. From this it is clear that softer skills such as experience of the issue or local knowledge are often further down the list and that the language used is very narrow, e.g. ‘Conflict resolution’ instead of diplomacy. It is important that boards seeking to recruit assess the gaps they have, and that a lack of diversity is viewed as a gap in the same way as other topics. It is also important that the language used in recruitment is appropriate, and focusses on transferable skills and potential skills not just on professional skills already possessed by a person.

### *iii) Poor promotion of opportunities*

Poor advertising of opportunities and poor recruitment practices were highlighted as a potential barrier to participation by 37 respondents.

### *Adverts*

Adverts were cited by 9% of the survey respondents in response to how they got involved, and formal recruitment processes are being used increasingly as organisations aim to become more professional. Adverts are often seen as a good way of ensuring diversity as they enable board members to reach beyond narrow personal circles (NCVO, 2010; Charity Commission, 2010). However, it is notable that the only respondents who reported getting involved after seeing an advert were all educated to at least university degree level. There is therefore possibly some risk that formal recruitment processes and narrowly worded adverts are alienating to

some potential board members and in fact are reducing diversity. One respondent spoke of finding that adverts “*ignore transferable skills and expect board members to fit the mould.*” Organisations need to use the right language and the right types and location of advert to reach out and engage people.

#### *Word of mouth*

Word of mouth and personal approaches were a frequent and successful method of recruiting new board members. For many people, particularly those new to boards, personal invitations encouraged them to make the step from interested bystander or enthusiastic member to sitting on a board.

The down-side to relying on word of mouth is that people rely on existing contacts and networks, and it is felt that this can lead to a lack of board diversity. Word of mouth is therefore often regarded as a poor way to recruit board members.<sup>4</sup>

However, many survey respondents explained that they had been approached specifically to add to board diversity and that without this personal approach they may not have considered the role. Used well, word of mouth recruitment can be a very effective way of engaging service users and inviting them to join the board. Personal approaches can support diversity by approaching those who might not otherwise feel they have the skills or the confidence to volunteer.

*“I was asked to join the Board. I had been supporting the charity for over a year as part of my paid job and they were keen to recruit younger/female Trustees” (Female respondent, 25-44)*

*“Was involved with the charity and had offered voluntary and paid help before being asked to join board. Also board was all male and they had been looking for female to join to give different point of view” (Female respondent, 45-59)*

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Charity Commission (2005a) noted “we are disappointed with our findings in other areas: use of word of mouth and personal recommendation as a method of attracting new trustees has significantly increased” (p2).

### **c) Barriers to ongoing participation**

Getting people past the initial barriers to participation is only the first step, as it is crucial that new trustees continue volunteering on the board, building up their knowledge and experience and contributing to the organisation's success. The research findings show that the majority of respondents have been involved with boards for many years (Fig 18), suggesting that for many people once they get involved with boards they tend to continue their participation. However, a number of respondents reported people leaving after only attending an initial meeting or at a very early stage in their participation, often with no explanation. After the effort of getting new people on to the board, this loss of people who initially showed interest represents significant wasted potential. Respondents suggested a number of factors which may contribute to people leaving boards. It should also be noted that while many people cite time or other commitments as reasons for stepping down, there may be other underlying issues which people are less comfortable giving as a reason, such as feeling out of their depths, or not feeling welcomed or appreciated.

#### *i) Responsibilities, language and procedures*

The second most common barrier to participation raised by respondents was worries around responsibilities, particularly around financial issues but also HR and difficult employment issues. 84% (180) of respondents rated worries about responsibilities such as finances, HR and legal issues as a key or secondary barrier to wider participation. This is again consistent with OPM research where the high level of responsibility due to financial and legal liabilities was rated by trustees as the second least popular aspect of their role, after workload and time commitment.

Newcomers to boards also often find themselves faced with unfamiliar terms such as 'quorums', acronyms, new charity financial terminology and third sector jargon. Existing board members have often been on boards for many years, and perhaps forget how unfamiliar language and terminology can be to newcomers. Fig 23 shows that the language and processes of boards was rated as a key or secondary barrier by 78% (168) of respondents. A number of respondents suggested that these factors can be very challenging for new-comers to boards, and can leave them feeling out of their depth. One respondent suggested that a further problem is

*“Being made to feel stupid when asking questions”*. These factors are likely to put off people who are unfamiliar with the third sector and those who have less academic or ‘professional’ backgrounds.

A number of respondents suggest that there is a lack of support and training, and one respondent highlighted that this lack of support can give people a negative introduction to boards:

*“there are limited opportunities to learn how to do it well - so often people have poor early experiences of what being on a Board means”*

Respondents suggested that inductions, training, and support for new members could help ensure that people feel able to contribute and stay on boards:

*“Boards would operate much more effectively if members had an honest appraisal of the aims and objectives, skills and experience, and time commitment involved from the outset. A simple induction would provide this.”*

#### *ii) Board dynamics and democratic processes*

Different ideas and perspectives, and discussions around strategy and vision are an essential part of board meetings. However, when respondents were asked about their own experiences of things they found off-putting about boards or which made it difficult for them to participate, the most frequently cited reasons all centred on personality and tensions, such as personality clashes and poor group dynamics. This is significantly higher than the 7% of trustees surveyed by OPM who said that ‘tension/conflict within the board’ was something that they disliked about their role. This difference can in part be attributed to differences in the wording of the question. Another factor may be that to some extent respondents are letting off steam, as no-one has asked them about this aspect of board work before<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Informal talks with board members during the course of this research resulted in many having a moan about their fellow board members, but this seemed more about catharsis and unburdening as many spoke of not usually being able to express their annoyances. None suggested that personality clashes were a reason for resigning.

While respondents rarely actually resigned due to personality clashes, the impact of group dynamics in terms of people feeling able to contribute and feeling valued may have implications for diversity. A number of respondents reported resigning or finding it difficult to participate due to not being made to feel welcome by other board members. The terms 'cliques' or 'cliquey atmosphere' was used by eight separate respondents. Other respondents reported that meetings could often be dominated by the longer-standing members of the group. Six female respondents said that all-male or male-dominated boards had been off-putting for them.

Feeling that their contribution is not valued was one of the top reason cited by respondents themselves for resigning, and for others resigning – see Tables 4 and 5. In particular, younger members, respondents who were on boards as service user representatives and respondents with less academic and 'professional' backgrounds were more likely to feel patronised or not listened to:

*One Board I was on was extremely formal and I felt like a duck out of water and struggled to understand the business side of what was going on. It was very male-dominated and as a woman I found this hard. The others weren't very friendly. I felt my role (user rep) was undervalued and tokenistic.*

While many of the interpersonal factors cited as off-putting may simply be down to the perception of the newcomer and not deliberate on the part of existing board members, there are implications for retaining board members who are perhaps less confident, or who are more socially anxious in unfamiliar or uncomfortable settings. Minimising confrontation and ensuring that new board members feel welcomed and valued could help keep people on the board and can also help overcome those with less confidence.

Finally, many respondents spoke of boards which were 'undemocratic'. Some cited decisions being made outwith meetings by "*kitchen cabinets*", and one respondent felt that "*decisions were made before meetings by the alpha mums*". Others felt that their opinions were not wanted if different. A number of respondents gave examples of Chairs who dominated meetings, and who "*think their role is to tell us what they think and we agree*"

#### **d) Social capital and board participation**

The findings suggest that motivations to participate on boards are generally similar across respondents, regardless of age, gender and socio-economic background. Motivations tend to be primarily altruistic, stemming from a desire to support an organisation or cause, improve the local community or local facilities, and give something back to society. The link between strong social networks and high levels of social capital, and the propensity to voluntary action can be seen in respondents' routes to participation. Most respondents were already involved with the organisations in some way, and were then asked to join the board. This implies that individuals with high levels of social capital are more likely to participate on boards.

However, social capital in itself does not adequately explain why some people are more likely than others to volunteer on boards. From the reasons for getting involved with boards it is apparent that the strongest motivating factor by far, cited by over 80 respondents, is a belief that they can make a valuable contribution through their skills and experience. The flip-side of this is that the second most frequently suggested barrier to participation is that people do not believe they have right skills to participate on boards. Further, those who felt they had skills were more likely to be better educated and better paid than the average respondent. This suggests that as well as social capital, cultural capital and economic capital play a central role in voluntary action and boards.

As the findings show, boards currently lack diversity. This in turn has implications in terms of the 'norms' of behaviour which in turn has an impact on whether and how people take voluntary action. Perceptions of board members being older and of high socio-economic status can contribute to *"old assumptions about power and authority/ service, age and responsibility that create a narrow stereotype about being a Director/Trustee/Board member"*. Lack of diversity may also impact negatively on bridging and linking social capital, as board members may not have connections to many outside their own communities or social circles. This in turn can result in many people not being in contact with boards, and who therefore are unfamiliar with



boards, are not in groups where participating on boards is part of usual norms and traditions, and who are less likely to be asked to contribute their experiences.

Board members are less likely to live in deprived areas as defined by the SIMD and to have high socio-economic status. There are several possible factors for lower participation rates in 'working class' or more deprived areas. Lindsay and Clifford (2011) suggest most of the data available is concerned with formal volunteering and registered charities and is likely to underestimate the high levels of informal volunteering and mutual support that happen in many communities. Further, many of the most deprived areas of Scotland are ones which through economic loss, redundancy, and population migration have seen communities broken up and social capital eroded. Former industrial areas often lost the sole source of employment which formerly connected the community such as factories, coal-mining or shipbuilding, creating poverty and a movement of people out of the area resulting in both a loss of economic and social capital. Many local authority and social housing estates are also 'newer' communities with less of the established networks and relationships needed to generate trust and social capital. In addition to this Clifford (2012) found that less charities operate in deprived areas, and that those that do tend to be large, national, government funded charities. He suggests that one of the consequences of this is decreased opportunities for formal voluntary participation and engagement with voluntary organisations. By extension, there will be far fewer opportunities to become involved with boards. This would imply that communities with high levels of social capital are more likely to have high levels of participation on boards.

There may also be negative associations, with this type of activity being seen as normally forced onto the community by outsiders or government.

Bourdieu's theories of social capital suggest that social capital can be a factor in re-enforcing social hierarchies and maintaining power imbalances. Some of the findings challenge this theory, as many respondents use social capital to challenge inequality and political status quo. This aspect of social capital is also recognised by Bourdieu. Further, many (often older) board members recognise the importance of sharing 'power', and the second most common reason to resign from boards is to

allow fresh blood to take the helm: *“I think it is bad practice to stay on a Board for too long. It is important that Boards have fresh blood and don't get clogged up with old fogies.”*

However, there do remain some power imbalances, with younger people, women, and those with less formal education feeling less able to participate on boards and in particular taking on the role of Chair or ‘Chairman’ to use the older term.

Preconceptions of what a chair - older, wiser, usually male - tie in with Bourdieu’s notion of the *“pater familias*, the eldest, most senior member, is tacitly recognized as the only person entitled to speak on behalf of the family group in all official circumstances” (1986, p53)

In summary, from the findings it would appear that people with high levels of social capital **and** higher ‘social standing’ are more likely to participate on boards and have their voices heard on third sector boards. This will potentially impact negatively on diversity but also implications for hierarchies within organisations (who gets elected to the board) and hierarchies within boards (who gets elected Chair) and who is listened to in the more narrow sphere of the board itself.

### **e) Implications for community empowerment**

The first issue around community empowerment is the role of the third sector as a tool for community representation and engagement. Organisations such as community councils and charities are more likely to be consulted with and heard than individuals, and so those who are not well-represented are likely to not have their views heard, which can create power imbalances and hierarchies **within** communities.

Secondly, areas with less social capital and less voluntary activity are likely to have less third sector organisations and representative bodies are less likely to have a voice. This in principle can create hierarchies **between** communities. In practice it could potentially have significant impact as some communities may be less able to

express community need or lobby for services as effectively as a neighbouring area with higher social capital.

Finally, areas without the infrastructure and the people skills to set up third sector bodies themselves risk missing out on opportunities outlined in the Community Empowerment Bill, such as taking ownership of community assets such as community centres. They also risk being less able to step up to community need in the face of closure of services or facilities, as this was often cited the impetus for *“Local council closed swim pool and games hall. Petition, campaign group, saved pool and enterprise group was started”*

This potential for the Bill to lead inadvertently to greater inequality has been highlighted by commentators on the Bill, who point out that “The bill must ensure that organisations are genuinely representative of the community and not exclusive members clubs which exist to benefit a minority” (Spital, 2013)

Respondents to the Community Empowerment Bill consultation demanded that the process be about genuine community engagement and pressed for the government to provide more support for community capacity building (Scottish Government, 2013, p19)

## **4) Conclusions and recommendations**

### *Recommendations*

Are boards representative of the wider population? Based on the findings of this research the short answer has to be ‘No’. However, it is not being suggested that boards should exactly mirror the wider population. Board members roles and responsibilities mean that board participation will be skewed towards those who possess the appropriate skills and knowledge.

Valuing different perspectives and experiences is central to ensuring that boards recruit diverse boards, which in turn should lead to improved representativeness and a more effective board.

- It is therefore recommended that boards take a broad and inclusive view when assessing what skills and knowledge they view as 'appropriate'.

In terms of motivations, the research found that board members are generally involved with boards for similar reasons, regardless of their backgrounds. Board members get involved with organisations to support a cause, improve local facilities, get involved in their local communities, tackle injustice, represent others and make a difference. Board members stay involved because they can see that they are making a real difference to people's lives, and see the impact that collective action can make. It is important for boards to recognise these motivations and use language that resonates with board members in their recruitment processes.

In terms of barriers, the research has found that existing board members identified a number of key barriers to participation. Many of these barriers negatively impact participation across all demographic groups. However, most barriers cited appear likely to have negative impact on diversity. The time commitment appeared to affect younger and working age people more than retired people. Worries around the skills required appear to make participation particularly difficult for those with less formal education. Individuals with high levels of social capital, as well as those with more cultural and economic capital are more likely to volunteer.

As well as the current unrepresentativeness of boards, public perceptions of boards as 'not for people like me' or 'for middle-class retired people' compound the problem.

There is a role for boards to address these barriers:

- By addressing the image problem and promoting stories of board members which reflect diversity
- By ensuring that recruitment methods reach wider audiences, as well as using new media to engage younger people
- By ensuring that a broad view of skills is taken, and that adverts are worded using appropriate language that will appeal to wider groups

A number of respondent also cited practical barriers around financial and legal responsibilities and the lack of support and training available, particularly for new and inexperienced board members. It is important that boards explain responsibilities and

address concerns. There are also numerous resources available to boards which can make participation on boards less worrying for those who perhaps do not have legal or professional experience. Local third sector interfaces can provide support on funding and accounting, as well as organisational development support. Organisations such as SCVO provide a free Information Service, as well as giving smaller organisations access to pro bono legal, financial and HR advice.

- It is therefore recommended that boards provide new board members with an induction and with access to support in the early stages.

Communities with higher levels of social and economic capital were found to have higher numbers of voluntary organisations and higher levels of voluntary activity. They were also more likely to have community members on boards. The implication of this is that it is difficult for people in more deprived areas to participate on voluntary sector bodies. This because they face two barriers: lower personal levels of social and cultural capital, and less social capital in their community, leading to lower voluntary action and reduced opportunities to participate on boards. This has serious implications in terms of equality as not only are some sections of society at risk of not having a voice, whole communities are less able to participate in formal voluntary action and have their community's voice heard and listened to

If the Scottish Government is serious about community empowerment and encouraging local communities to control and manage their communities assets, then passing the Community Empowerment Bill is only the first step – the car may have been built, but who gets to sit in the driving seat?

It is therefore recommended that

- The Scottish Government takes forward the recommendations from the Community Empowerment Bill Consultation, and invests in community development
- The third sector also has a role to support new community organisations and their boards, via infrastructure bodies such as the interfaces and the Development Trust Association. Other options could include secondees from more established organisations advising newer boards

Finally, the findings from this research suggest that in order to widen diversity the sector has to take a long term view. While diversity may be desirable, it is not necessary to achieve this overnight, and should not be sought through a single 'tick box' board member. Widening participation to well-represented groups such as retired people or well-educated third sector professionals is also important, as the sector needs to increase overall participation. If diversity on boards is viewed as a long term goal, and the primary goal is representation and meaningful consultation then it is recommended that

- Boards increases involvement volunteering and community events as existing links often lead to people getting involved on boards
- Community consultations carried out well can involve all community groups, without people having to sit on boards if they do not want to
- Representatives from youth groups or other minority groups sit on boards as advisors, without having to sit through more onerous aspects such as budgeting
- Larger charities playing a role in ensuring local projects involve local people.

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