The impact of a changing policy environment on board members in small and medium-sized voluntary organisations

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of volunteers serving as board members in small and medium-sized voluntary organisations (VOs) in England. It considers the ways in which policy developments, including the outsourcing of public service delivery and austerity programmes, are impacting on this group of volunteers. Relatively little research has considered policy change from a board member perspective, despite their key role in organisational governance. The article draws upon qualitative interviews with individual board members. It shows that policy changes are contributing to an increasingly complex role for board members in small and medium-sized VOs. The policy environment impacts on board members both by driving more challenging organisational issues for the board and, in turn, by contributing to stress and a lack of confidence at an individual level. Recruitment, training and support mechanisms are not always adequate in meeting the needs of this specific group of volunteers within this context.

Introduction

This article explores how volunteers on the boards of small and medium-sized[2] voluntary organisations (VOs) are impacted by changes in the external environment, specifically within the context of rapidly changing policy developments in England. The challenges facing voluntary organisations in this context are well-documented elsewhere. For example, recent UK research has considered the implications of contracting out public services (Rees and Mullins, 2016), the constraining nature of austerity policies on the sector's 'voice' (Hemmings, 2017) and broader concerns about the "turbulent times" that VOs are experiencing (Milbourne and Murray, 2017). Other examples of the changing landscape for VOs in England include an emphasis on New Public Management principles; new fundraising rules; changes to accounting reporting requirements; new legislation

on lobbying and campaigning and perceived threats to independence (see, for example, Hyndman, 2017; Morris, 2016).

However, research on the specific perspectives and experiences of volunteers has been relatively absent from work assessing the impact of policy on the English voluntary sector (Macmillan, 2010). Despite some work to consider this gap in terms of front-line volunteers (for example Ellis Paine and Hill, 2016) there remains a lack of recent research into the specific responsibilities and experiences of volunteer board members within the context of policy change. This article addresses that research gap by exploring the perspectives of volunteer board members operating within this policy context.

The article makes a contribution to international debates about the factors that impact upon the governance of voluntary organisations at board-level. It shows that environmental factors - specifically the external social policy context - impact on how board members perceive and experience their role. In particular, this research contributes to our understanding of the qualitative ways in which board members in small and medium-sized VOs are affected by the external policy environment.

The central argument is that the policy landscape - including the contracting out of public services and the implementation of wide-ranging austerity measures - impacts directly and indirectly on volunteers occupying positions on the boards of small and medium-sized VOs. Firstly, the policy environment raises challenges for their organisations. This results in greater complexity of the issues and decisions faced at board level. Board members feel they need new skills and knowledge to equip them for these. Secondly, the policy environment impacts on board members on an individual level. Some experience the challenges of the role as profoundly stressful and emotional on a personal level. The article presents evidence that this is impacting on the recruitment and support of board members in this context. The findings of this research are relevant to anyone with an interest in the recruitment, retention, training and support of board members, particularly those in small and medium-sized organisations.

The article draws on data from qualitative interviews with board members conducted in 2009/10 and in 2017 to address the following questions:
- How is the policy environment experienced by board members responsible for governing small and medium-sized voluntary organisations?
- What are the implications of the changing policy climate for the recruitment, roles and support needs of volunteer board members?

The roles and responsibilities of board members

Amid questions over the professionalisation and marketisation of the voluntary sector, and debates about its distinctiveness from private or statutory sectors, their governance by a board consisting of volunteers remains one 'distinctive' feature of voluntary organisations (Metcalf, 2013).[2] In the English context the board members charged with leading these organisations are charity trustees bound by charity law and the requirements of the Charity Commission for England and Wales. There are some 700,000 people in these roles in England and Wales (Lee et al., 2017). Their responsibilities include ensuring the organisation is carrying out its purpose for public benefit, is compliant with its governing document and the law, is accountable, and manages resources appropriately. They are required to act with reasonable care and skill and act in the organisations' best interests (Charity Commission, 2015). In short the official view is that board members 'have and must accept ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of a charity' (Charity Commission, 2008: 6).

Harris (1996) classifies the work of boards in the UK under five broad headings: acting as employer; ensuring organisational goals are adhered to; securing and protecting resources; acting as point of final accountability and providing a link between the organisation and its external environment and stakeholders. Miller-Milleson (2003) summarised the prescribed roles of boards set out in a range of US-based 'good practice' literature. These commonly prescribed board responsibilities included determining organisational mission; recruiting, supporting and evaluating the Chief Officer; engaging in strategic planning, approving and monitoring the organisations' services; securing and managing finances, enhancing the organisation's public image / profile; strengthening board effectiveness and ensuring compliance with legal and governance requirements. In England, the prescribed guidance includes the Charity Governance Code for Smaller Charities (2017), which expects boards to focus on seven key principles of good governance. These are: organisational purpose; leadership; integrity; decision making, risk and control; board effectiveness; diversity and openness and accountability.

Identifying what exactly board members do is subject to contestation and ambiguity. There can be a gap between prescribed guidance and practice (Widmer, 1993; Cornforth, 1996; Wright and Millesen, 2008; Stewart, 2017). In part, this arises from confusion about the appropriate boundaries between paid staff and the board, and between management and governance (Harris, 1989; 1993). Cornforth (1996) observed that the expectations of board members set out in prescriptive guidance is potentially unrealistic given the time they can commit. This can reproduce idealised 'heroic myths' about what the role entails. Wright and Millesen's (2008) US-focused study of role ambiguity underlines the importance of training to help board members understand what is expected of them and how to fulfil their duties. They emphasise that board development (including training, feedback and evaluation) is key to supporting board members to both understand and carry out their governance responsibilities.

A raft of international literature focuses on factors contributing to board roles and board performance. Brown (2007) draws on resource dependency theory to argue that boards must secure necessary resources. This includes acquiring and developing competent board members, which in turn leads to stronger board effectiveness. Ongoing training and experience (length of time served) have also been shown to be important factors in board members' confidence (Brown et al., 2012). Other internal factors that have been studied include board composition (e.g. Brown, 2005) and diversity (e.g. Harris, 2014). The significance of board size and subcommittee structure (Cornforth, 2001) and the relationships between staff and boards / chairs (e.g. Reid and Turbide, 2014; Cornforth and Macmillan, 2016) have also been examined.

Board members and the external policy environment

Other research has sought to understand how the external environment might impact on board practices. Brown and Guo (2010) suggest that the external environment can influence the prevalence of particular board roles. Their US-based study of how nonprofit executives conceptualise the role of the board indicated that, for example, complexity in the external environment can lead to greater emphasis on the board's strategic planning. In smaller, resource-constrained organisations, the board's fundraising role may be prioritised. Also based in the US, Ostrower and Stone (2010) propose a contingency-based framework to develop understanding of how various contextual factors influence governance at board level. Both internal factors (such as board composition) and external factors (such as the regulatory and policy environments) appear to impact on board practices. They show that external conditions influence the roles and responsibilities of boards. This is particularly the case for boards' externally oriented roles, such as their fundraising and community relationship roles and their adoption of accountability-related practices. As they argue, greater attention needs to be paid to specific elements of the external context in which boards operate, such as the funding environment, legal and regulatory requirements and government policy.

An Australian study by Considine et al. (2014) examined the impact of the contracting environment on the identity and practices of nonprofit boards in the employment sub-sector. It found that the increasingly commercial and competitive external environment arising from contracting led boards to become increasingly business-like. It also led them to adopt new board skills-sets and recruitment processes in a bid to 'professionalise' board practices. The authors conclude that government policy making does influence board behaviours and point to the 'cultural impact' of contracting on nonprofit boards. In the UK, Margaret Harris (1998) examined how boards and their individual members were affected by changes in social welfare policies, such as the emergence of contracting and growing competition. She showed that the way such public policies were implemented could be at odds with board members' motivations and their understanding of the voluntary sector ethos. For example, policy implementation processes that involved increased monitoring or regulation and the threat of sanctions threatened to undermine the commitment of voluntary board members. Harris (1998: 180) therefore argues that the external policy environment has "touched" boards and affects the way they fulfil their functions. Relatively few other studies have examined the impact of the external policy

environment on the experiences of board members of English or UK voluntary organisations. Studies concerned with the implications of policy change have tended to focus on the perspectives of paid staff while sometimes neglecting those of board members, volunteers and service users (Macmillan, 2010).

Board members in smaller organisations

There are indications that organisational size is likely to be a significant factor in how board members experience the role. In a survey of charities in England and Wales, Cornforth and Simpson (2002) found that a number of board characteristics varied with organisational size. Larger organisations were more likely to have larger boards and more subcommittees. They were more likely to offer formal support to board members, to provide written job descriptions for the role, and to offer induction and training to new board members. The study also found that the smallest organisations were almost four times more likely than large organisations to experience difficulty in recruiting volunteers to their boards. Rochester (2003) agrees that boards in small English organisations have distinctive qualities. He argues that they experience a "liability of smallness", and often lack the resources and expertise that larger organisations have at their disposal to meet bidding, monitoring and fundraising requirements (2003: 116). Concerns about the lack of training for board members are also amplified in smaller voluntary organisations in England and Wales (Lee et al., 2017).

More recent research points to the disproportionate impact of policy change on small and medium-sized organisations. Aiken and Harris (2017) argue that many smaller organisations are struggling as a result of environmental changes such as funding and regulatory pressures in England. Smaller and medium-sized VOs are disproportionately subject to government funding reductions, despite their ability to address disadvantage in ways that larger organisations cannot (Lloyds Bank Foundation, 2016; Dayson et al., 2018). Crees et al. (2016) suggest that smaller organisations in the UK may use a range of strategies to navigate changes in the external environment, including reducing services; reducing staff hours; staff redundancies and joint ventures or mergers with other voluntary organisations.

An understanding of the particular set of challenges faced by board members steering smaller organisations through this context is therefore important. As many researchers in voluntary sector studies have identified, voluntary organisations are extremely heterogeneous. A significant proportion of US-based research has focused on larger organisations while relatively little is known about the boards of smaller community-based organisations (Cornforth, 2012). This article takes as its focus the experiences of individual board members serving in small and medium-sized organisations operating in a single City Region in England.

Methods

The arguments forwarded in this article are based upon qualitative interviews with board members conducted as part of a study in 2009/10 (n = 25) and a small, follow-up study in 2017 (n = 7) (see Table 1). The specific focus of this article is the experiences of the board members in small and medium-sized organisations. Primarily, the article focuses on data elicited from board members interviewed in the original 2009/10 study. The original interviews were conducted as part of a broader study that also comprised interviews with senior staff of voluntary organisations and representatives of voluntary sector infrastructure agencies, policymakers and service commissioners. For the purposes of this article only data from board members' perspectives is included. Data from the main study was supplemented by a small number of follow-up interviews in 2017. An opportunity was taken to revisit some of the original participants and conduct a small follow-up study with 7 board members. Of these, 3 were repeat interviews with original participants, and 4 with different board members of some of the same organisations represented in the 2009/10 interviews. In these follow-up interviews, a particular focus on the changing external environment was taken and a specific question added about 'what has changed?'. A similar method has been employed in other voluntary sector research, such as that by Hemmings (2017) in this journal. Board members were initially recruited via a combination of an advertisement that was circulated among local voluntary sector networks and "snowballing" techniques. Board members can be difficult to access directly (Stewart, 2017) and in some cases access was gained via paid staff. These approaches overcame the difficulties of mapping the voluntary sector at a local level (Mohan, 2012) and the lack of a complete or reliable sampling frame of either VOs or board members.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of interviewees. In some cases, individuals were volunteering as board members in two or more organisations (recent survey findings by Lee et al., (2017) indicate an average of 1.35 board memberships per board member). Where applicable, Table 1 describes the organisation that a participant chose to give most attention to during the interview (termed here as the 'main organisation'). The table shows the size (based on NCVO 2019 definitions[1]) and income (based on Charity Commission registration bands) of the participants' organisation. The arguments forwarded in this article are based on data drawn from interviews with board members in the small and medium-sized organisations. The organisations represented were all operating in a single City Region that comprises six local authority areas. They provide a range of welfare services (broadly defined) as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Main study?	Follow-up study?	Gender	Years served on main board	Other board positions?	Main Organisation field	Main Organisation size/ income band
Nicholas	Y	N	M	8		Education / Development	Small (£10K-£100K)
Helen	N	Y	F	1		Education / Development	Small (£10K-£100K)
Charlotte	Y	N	F	9		Welfare – women	Small (£10K-£100K)
Linda	N	Y	F	9		Welfare – women	Small (£10K-£100K)
Lucy	Y	N	F	1		Childcare	Small (£10K-£100K)
Dana	Y	N	F	4		Children & youth	Small (£10K-£100K)
Julia	Y	N	F	6		Community arts	Small (£10K-£100K)
Sian	Y	N	F	2		Welfare – BME	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Max	N	Y	M	5	1	Welfare - BME	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Peter	Y	N	M	10		Refugee advocacy	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Hannah	Y	N	F	<1		Health advocacy	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Michael	Y	N	M	8		Refugee support	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Colin	Y	N	M	5		Mental health	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Andrew	Y	N	M	1		Mental health	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Annette	Y	Y	F	9	2	Community development	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Mick	Y	Y	M	3		Domestic violence	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Alice	Y	N	F	3		Welfare – BME women	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Dayo	Y	N	F	2	1	Domestic violence	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Steve	Y	N	M	3		Housing	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Gary	Y	N	M	4		Advocacy & advice	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Frank	Y	N	M	3		Community development	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Robert	N	Y	M	4	2	Refugee support	Medium (£100K-£500K)
Bridget	Y	Y	F	2		Housing	Medium (£500K-£1M)
Kirsty	Y	N	F	<1		Advocacy	Medium (£500K-£1M)
Matthew	Y	N	M	7		Disability care	Large (£1M-£10M)
Bill	Y	N	M	2		Disability care	Large (£1M-£10M)
Jonathan	Y	N	M	2	1	Health research	Large (£1M-£10M)
Ken	Y	N	M	4		Health research	Large (£1M-£10M)
Pauline	Y	N	F	9		Social services	Major (£10M-100M)

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines (British Sociological Association, 2002). Participants provided their informed consent and gave permission for interviews to be digitally recorded and transcribed. Individuals participating in the research were anonymised to provide confidentiality for them and their organisations. A semi-structured interview guide was designed, drawing on themes arising in the

literature. This allowed an element of structure and consistency, ensuring that the same questions were discussed with all participants. However, flexibility was built into the interviews to allow space for board members to raise and discuss the issues that they felt were of most importance to themselves and their experiences of their role. The transcripts were coded and analysed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). An inductive approach was adopted, where concepts could emerge from the data as opposed to imposing a hypothesis or pre-established concepts on the research. Interview transcripts and fieldwork diaries were coded line by line to identify categories and meanings within the data, consistent with grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006). This was repeated as part of an iterative process to ensure consistent identification of codes and identify patterns and connections across the data. NVivo 11 software was used to facilitate the data analysis. Table 2 provides an example of the process of developing codes into themes.

Table 2: Data analysis (selected codes and themes)

Selected codes	Analytical categories	Overarching Themes
Growing complexity New governance requirements Sense of responsibility Learning curve Skills and knowledge gaps	Board member role	Impacts of external policy environment – **Experienced at individual level**
Lack of confidence Stress / anxiety / 'losing sleep' Sense of failure / guilt	Emotional responses	
Financial cost of training Constant 'firefighting' Time constraints	Barriers to training & support	
Scarcity of resources Short-term funding Closing services / staff redundancies	Funding climate	Impacts of external policy environment – **Experienced at organisational level**
Funder influence on board decisions Funder reporting requirements Competition with other VO's Community impacted by austerity Service users with complex needs	External relationships	
Business language Aspiration to be 'business-like' Not a business / asserting distinctive identity	Business drivers	
Increased demand for services Complexity of funding applications Monitoring and measurement Doing 'more for less'	Increased complexity	

Findings

Impacts of policy change experienced by board members

Contracting, funding and competition: Board members perceived that the challenges encountered at board level are amplified in a policy context that encourages voluntary organisations to bid for public service contracts. The majority of board members interviewed in 2009/10 were experiencing considerable anxiety about the financial stability of their organisations. In large part, these anxieties arose in a policy context that was creating a shift away from grant funding towards a contracting model. For at least half of them, funding difficulties were one of the most worrying and challenging aspects of the role:

> *"There is always the worry of funding. I see my role as an important role in helping an organisation like this keep going… trying to keep the place buoyant."* [Andrew, Board Member, Mental health organisation - 2010]

There was a perception that large organisations have an advantage in bidding for and securing funding. The funding application process was described as resource-intensive and as placing a disproportionate strain on smaller organisations with few or no paid staff:

> *"The charities that thrive are not necessarily the charities that deserve to thrive, it's the charities that have geared themselves up to present themselves in the best possible light and maybe even have employed people to do that. And generally that tends to be the bigger players. Because they've got the resources to do that."* [Nicholas, Board member, Community Education organisation - 2010]

A common observation among participants was the increasing need to compete with other organisations for funding, which also acted as a disincentive to collaboration:

> *"We contacted a load of [other VOs]. Just to get together and talk about the issues that we are having and learning – like how did you get over it, and joint help. And whether to go in for joint bids.… But we didn't get much response back. I mean people in other charities are uncertain, they don't know what your motive is for getting together, you know.   Its lack of trust."* [Colin, Board member, Mental health organisation - 2010]

Independence and relationships with funders: VOs with more detailed and robust policies were more likely to score higher points when bidding for public service delivery contracts. Consequentially boards experienced pressure to develop more complex policies and procedures to impress funders:

> *"What drives [our policies and procedures] is actually the requirements of funders now… there is a danger that it becomes too detailed and bureaucratic and you spend more time trying to make sure you keep to the policy than doing anything useful."* [Gary, Board Member, Advocacy and advice organisation -2010]

Echoing this, another board member explained that a large part of the board's work was to demonstrate to funders that they had particular structures and policies in place. They were expected to measure, monitor and report on the impact of their work. She felt this was largely about "ticking boxes" for potential funders and created a workload for the board that was disproportionate given the organisation's small size.

The relationship with external funders presented challenges for board members in other ways. For example, one reported that her organisation had declined money from a funder because it came with the caveat that they should not employ a specific member of staff:

> *"They were dictating who we should employ. They would have given us the money if we had changed particular personnel in the organisation. We said no. We lost that [funding opportunity] but we had to keep to our principles."* [Alice, Board Member, BME welfare VO - 2010]

The same organisation had been faced with decisions with potential consequences for the organisation's core mission and objectives. This participant explained that the organisation had begun to rent out space in order to generate income but perceived that they were in danger of becoming primarily a landlord instead of focusing on their key aims and beneficiary group.

Business imperatives: Board members explained that the changing policy environment means that they are increasingly expected - or even required - to make the voluntary organisations they lead more 'business-like' in terms of systems, processes and language. Some placed a high value on the characteristics of private sector businesses and implied that voluntary sector organisations could benefit from adopting similar approaches. However there was also evidence of resistance to this, indicated by board members who were explicitly conscious of the pressure to conform to business imperatives. They saw a distinction between the values and practices of voluntary and private organisations, and perceived that voluntary sector organisations are richer in the sense of their values:

> *"You're not running a business. Businesses are for profit… Charities aren't about exploiting others and maximising profit… Charities aren't run on those principles and yet they find themselves using the same language. I find that is a fundamental ideological problem."*
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> [Nicholas, Board member, Community Education Organisation - 2010]

What has changed? Growing demand, decreasing resources: The 2017 interviews added an extra dimension by asking participants 'what has changed?' This highlighted some of the challenges facing VOs arising from an 'austerity' policy climate characterised by deep funding cuts accompanied by extensive changes to welfare benefits. Board members steering VOs saw that this changing landscape had compounded and intensified experienced their concerns about funding and sustainability for their organisations. This was accompanied by associated challenges arising from the growing pressure on resources. One participant in both tranches of interviews explained that that the complexity of frontline casework had increased since 2010, with

service users presenting with multiple support needs arising from welfare reforms. Their VO might now work with an individual experiencing housing, employment, debt and associated mental health needs all at the same time. The volume of work for staff had grown, presenting challenges at board level about how to provide sufficient resources to meet growing demand for services. Since her first interview in 2010, another participant had led work to open a new service in her VO. They created a food bank and community kitchen in direct response to increasing food poverty in the local area. A third participant noted that 2017 was the first year since the first interview in 2009 that her board had not needed to issue redundancy notices to staff.

The emotional impact on board members: The challenging external environment impacted on the kinds of decisions taken by boards. This was primarily in terms of reduced funding pools, threats to sustainability and increasingly over-stretched resources. In turn, this impacted on a personal level for individuals volunteering in the role. Board members recalled "heartbreaking stories" of vulnerable service users, and one expressed anxiety about the risk of "abandoning" people if funding ended. One spoke of needing to "protect herself" and "put up barriers" in relation to how a service user's suicide had affected her.

> *"There are other heartbreaking stories - someone came as a refugee and they have no family at all, they're on their own here and there is absolutely no social network to support them. You think, "Right, we only have £1,000 to allocate currently. We've got twenty applications, what do we do?""* [Helen, Board member, Community Education organisation - 2017]

Board members also experienced distress when implementing decisions that would close services and make staff redundant:

> *"It was hugely stressful to think that we were going to be losing staff. I didn't meet anyone in that organisation that I didn't respect and rate. So, we were going to be letting go of people who were making a livelihood there…. We were putting the people we support, I think… at risk… That was quite a distressing thing."* [Max, Board member, BME welfare association - 2017]

Recruiting and supporting board members in a changing policy context

Increased challenges and perceived skills gaps: The external policy environment - particularly developments associated with contracting and 'austerity' - means that board members perceived the role as involving greater levels of responsibility, new challenges and intensifying pressures. Specifically, they reported that their responsibilities had increased and that they needed new skills and knowledge to equip them in keeping up with changes to the external environment.

> *"I feel a great sense of responsibility towards the wellbeing of this small charity"* [Nicholas, Board member, Community Education organisation - 2010]

A quarter of board members interviewed used the term "*a steep learning curve*" to describe their experiences. They needed support both when initially joining a board and when new issues were encountered for the first time. Examples included organisational growth (such as the award of a contract) and staff redundancy and project closures (when funding expires):

> *"We brought in advice from industrial lawyers about how we deal with staff and redundancy because we didn't know any of this. We had to learn as we were going along. We wanted to do it correctly, we didn't want any law suits or industrial tribunals."* [Alice, Board Member, BME welfare VO - 2010]

There was a perception that the external policy environment presented various potential risks to small and medium-sized organisations. Board members felt that they needed to gain an understanding of procurement and contract law, and to be aware of the hidden consequences of the contracts that they sign. Many were keenly aware of the need to manage new risks arising from the contracting environment. Others had little understanding of, or little or no involvement in, the process of negotiating, signing and monitoring contractual arrangements. Some viewed this as a task for paid staff, rather than the board. One board member confessed that she did not fully understand everything that happened in her organisation, and was unsure about whether or not her organisation held contracts or had bid for public service delivery work. While a small number of participants were unsure as to whether or not the role was affected by an organisation being awarded a contract, there was a strong sense from most that contracting raises important implications for board members and, in turn, their required skillsets.

Barriers to training: Board members experienced several barriers to accessing formal training. Firstly, some indicated that financial pressures were preventative, with even relatively inexpensive or subsidised courses proving prohibitively costly for small and medium-sized VOs:

> *"The [Council for Voluntary Service] do run courses… they always used to be free but now they are charging. We are volunteers, we don't get an income. I get paid [in my day job] but it is minimum wage. I can't afford £50… for a half day course."* [Alice, Board Member, BME welfare VO - 2010]

A second barrier to board member training was time. Although the local infrastructure body, the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), offered relevant training, it was usually run on weekdays which made attendance difficult for board members who worked full time. Some were already struggling to find sufficient time for board meetings and could not find extra time for training courses. A third difficulty identified was organisational challenges and crises that led to training becoming a lower priority.

Around half of board members had received some training, which varied both in content and format. Many received an induction when they joined the board, during which they met other board members and staff, and were introduced to the organisation's work, policies and procedures. However, in some cases the only induction provided was in the form of written documents, or being directed to the Charity Commission website. Some people had attended external training courses run by the CVS. Around half of board members interviewed had not received any training at all.

Board members reported that they frequently plug the gaps in board training and support, by drawing on knowledge and abilities gained outside their volunteering position (e.g. paid work or trades union roles). For example, one participant had identified an omission in her VO's policies and procedures after having done similar work in her paid employment. Drawing on experience gained within other arenas was an important resource in helping board members fulfil their responsibilities. Participants were asked about alternative forms of support and information available to them. None had accessed support from the national infrastructure organisations but a small number had received help from local sources such as the CVS and were very positive about this. Two board members had accessed specialist support from external advisors on legal and employment issues, although they acknowledged that this was expensive.

Changing board recruitment practices: Recruitment practices reported by participants reflected the apparent perception that board members need increasingly commercial or 'professional' knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the role. A board member from a BME organisation [2010] felt pressurised by the expectation that she should have a thorough financial and legal knowledge. She perceived that her knowledge of the client group and services had been key reasons that she had been invited to join the committee, but felt this was now undervalued.

A reoccurring theme in the 2009/10 interviews was an aspiration among VOs to attract new board members with professional skills and experience. The interviews conducted in 2017 indicated that in many cases this had been achieved. Participants in the 2017 interviews almost universally emphasised employment histories and experience when describing the board composition in their organisations. A high value was attached to having recruited board members who had worked in senior positions in the public and private sectors, and who could contribute legal, financial, human resources and commercial experience. Most board members were recruited through informal processes, despite guidance recommending organisations consider advertising and interviewing to attract a more diverse set of applicants. The vast majority of board members had been invited to the role by other board members or staff, or had heard about the opportunity via word of mouth. A small number explained that their organisation had placed adverts but that these received few suitable applicants. The preferred method of filling board vacancies was from amongst existing board members' networks and contacts. This often meant directly approaching people to invite them to join the board, especially when they were perceived to have useful professional experience.

In summary, the research has evidenced some of the specific ways in which the external policy environment impact on board members. Firstly, it has identified some of the organisational challenges that preoccupy individuals volunteering as board members. These include efforts to maintain organisational independence of voice, avoid mission drift, respond to impact measurement requirements and expectations that they become more 'businesslike'. Secondly, it has revealed some of the ways in which changes in the external policy environment are encountered by individual board member on a personal and emotional level. While acknowledging the rewards and satisfaction gained from this volunteering role, board members point to the emotional distress that can accompany it. The experience of issuing redundancy notices to staff or of withdrawing services from vulnerable people were poignant examples. Finally, the findings show that board members perceive that their role is increasingly complex and requires new skills and knowledge to equip them to respond to changes driven by policy developments. Board members want to develop their skills and knowledge, particularly their financial skills, commercial awareness, and understanding of contractual legal obligations. Despite this, they encounter a number of barriers to accessing relevant training and support. There is evidence of board members drawing on skills and knowledge gained elsewhere (such as paid work) to plug this skills gap. There are also indications that small and medium-sized organisations are increasingly seeking professional, commercial and financial skills when recruiting new members to their boards.

Discussion and conclusions

This article set out to examine the in-depth, qualitative experiences of volunteers serving as board members in small and medium-sized voluntary organisations in a rapidly changing policy context. The findings demonstrate that the external policy environment has an important influence on the experiences of board members. Board members experience this both at board level (a perception that board work is becoming more complex) and on a personal level (experienced emotionally in the form of stress, anxiety and distress). Research based on large scale, quantitative surveying of the US nonprofit sector has shown that board roles and responsibilities cannot be understood in isolation from external conditions (Ostrower and Stone, 2010). This article contributes rich, qualitative insights into *how* the external policy environment is perceived and felt by individuals serving on boards. The findings update and support Harris's (1998) argument that changes in the external social policy environment "touch" upon boards.

The empirical data on which this article is based was limited to individuals volunteering as board members in small and medium-sized VOs operating in a single City Region (comprising 6 local authorities) in England. It did not include interviews with those serving in large and / or national voluntary organisations. Nor did it focus on any organisation's board as a collective. Nevertheless it lends support to a contingency-based model of board governance (Ostrower and Stone, 2010) that suggests that board governance is influenced by aspects of the external environment (as well as internal characteristics). Further research might examine how specific aspects of board work in small and medium-sized organisations are affected by specific aspects of the changing

funding, legal and regulatory environment. The follow-up interviews reported in this article were limited to a very small sample size. As such they provide only a glimpse into board members' experiences of policy change over time. Longitudinal research that tracks board members is another potential direction for future research.

This article addresses a relative lack of recent research into the experiences of individual board members in small and medium-sized organisations in England. The qualitative nature of the research has facilitated insights into some issues raised by other (primarily quantitative) studies, such as the challenges in filling board vacancies and the apparent lack of training for board members (see, for example, Lee et al., 2017). It illuminates the changing policy context in which boards are operating. The small sample of follow-up interviews reveal deepening and compounding anxieties for board members arising from fresh policy developments such as austerity programmes. In the context of external change, there are evident continuities in some of the challenges facing board members. For example, the research findings indicate that board support and training remains lacking, consistent with longstanding concerns about its inadequacy (Working Party on Trustee Training, 1992; Low et al., 2007; Charity Commission, 2011). The issues preoccupying board members in small and medium-sized organisations echo some of the literature examining the implications of policy change for the sector. These include, for example, threats to independence, mission drift, business imperatives and impact measurement requirements (for example, Considine et al., 2014; Harlock and Metcalf, 2016; Hemmings, 2017). This article has elicited the perspectives of volunteer board members - a group that has been neglected in many studies of the impact of policy change.

The research raises various practical implications of relevance to anyone with an interest in recruiting, training and supporting board members - particularly those in smaller voluntary organisations. Firstly, this article has shown that board members in small and medium-sized organisations perceive intensifying training needs and face multiple barriers to training. This suggests that initiatives to up-skill board members might not actually be reaching their target audience. It also raises questions about whether the training programmes on offer are keeping up with board members' changing requirements driven by policy change.

Secondly, this article has also indicated a shift in the way that small and medium-sized organisations approach board recruitment. An emphasis on professional skills, even among volunteers, can be seen as symptomatic of the increasing trend towards professionalisation within the sector (Pick et al., 2011; Rees, 2014). It raises questions about whether the emphasis on business skills is at expense of other skillsets, knowledge and attributes. Campaigns to attract younger board members (Charity Commission, 2010) and efforts to involve service-users could be undermined by the privileging of pre-existing skills acquired from extensive experience in the workplace. The research also showed that most board members were recruited by informal processes, contrary to guidance that recommends more formal recruitment by advert (e.g Charity Commission, 2018). Participants indicated that being asked was an important reason in their decision to join the board, a finding that supports Musick and Wilson's (2008: 7) argument that "*people…are unlikely to volunteer if nobody asks*

them to do so". More research into how small and medium-sized organisations might better recruit board members would be valuable.

Finally, this article has revealed the emotional impact of social policy developments for volunteer board members. Others have described the '*violence of austerity*' (Cooper and Whyte, 2017) and outlined the profoundly harmful impacts of the government's welfare reforms on vulnerable service users (see, for example, Finnegan, 2016). Board members feel an immense sense of responsibility towards their organisations, their staff and their service users. Further research to understand board members' emotional labour and the implications for their motivation, retention and support needs would be welcome.

Notes

[1] *Definitions of organizational size vary in the literature. This article uses the The National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2019) bands, which define small organisations as those in the £10,000-£100,000 income band and medium-sized organisations as those with an income of £100,000 to £1million. This article uses the term 'smaller' to refer to organisations falling within the NCVO small and medium-sized categories. These organisations come within the remit of the Charity Governance Code for Smaller Charities (2017) that uses the term 'smaller' to mean organisations with an income of under £1million.*

[2.] *This article uses the NCVO definition of 'voluntary organisations' - that is all registered charities but excluding those controlled by government, independent schools, faith groups, housing associations and trade associations (see Clark et al., 2012: 17).*

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