



# Staff retention made easy: the Guardian Jobs guide

How charities can work to keep their best talent on board and make sure they recruit the right staff first time

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## Foreword

At Guardian Jobs, we speak to recruiters and HR professionals within charities every day - and host more than 30,000 third-sector job vacancies each year. We regularly hear about the challenges charities face in retaining great talent.

We have put this guide together with the aim of helping people like you support, nurture and retain good staff - so that when you do have to recruit new people it is for the right reasons.

Over the following pages, you will find interviews with fellow charity HR professionals, insights from the Guardian's team of expert recruiters, and shareable resources that will help you retain valuable staff.

We love working with and supporting the third sector and are keen to promote the fantastic work you do. We hope you enjoy this guide, and we are keen to hear your views on the issues it raises.

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**Kirsty Campbell, head of charities, Guardian Jobs**

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## Advice from Kirsty Campbell

**The head of charities at Guardian Jobs, Kirsty has more than 10 years' experience of connecting exceptional talent with leading charity employers. Here, she shares her insights into the key challenges and unique appeal of charity staff retention.**

### Keeping fundraisers

Fundraisers pose a retention challenge for charities; typically, people work as fundraisers for no more than a year or so. Even the biggest charities will agree that they struggle to retain fundraisers: over time they either get promoted, poached (if you're a successful fundraiser then everyone wants a piece of you), or move on. These are roles that are structurally predisposed to being short-term.

### Setting expectations

There are people who get jobs in the charity sector because they think it's a way of "slowing down" or "taking a break", when the reality is very different. While the culture may be very different to that of the corporate world, it is seldom an opportunity to do less work.

### Pay and conditions

Salaries are another likely reason for employees to move. Within charities themselves there are often very clear ceilings to salaries and progression. Therefore, within the third sector, candidates must move around to ensure any progression in terms of perks and salaries.

### Recruiting young people and graduates

Few charities invest in young people and graduate schemes, which means they don't benefit from the cohorts of long-term graduate employees that some large organisations do. Notable exceptions include [Macmillan](#), the [British Heart Foundation](#) (which has a combined graduate scheme) and [Cancer Research](#) (which is relatively well funded).

### Sector competition

There is huge competition among charities: many charities "fish from the same pool" and essentially poach talent from one another. It's a double-edged sword: large charities have great pulling power but also are an obvious target for other recruiters.

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## The big upside

**The frequent poaching of charity employees is a huge compliment to the skills and experiences within the sector. Find ways to keep those skills within your organisation, and you'll be in a really great place.**

### How to compete

You are trying to create an environment where people cannot imagine working anywhere else.

People join charities because they're passionate, because they want to make a difference, and because the culture of charities appeals to them: that's what makes them stay.

To improve retention, charities need to focus on the areas where they have an advantage.

Maximising work-life balance is a particularly important area, whether that means offering flexible hours, locations, part-time options or the chance to work from different offices. Charities can often be flexible in this regard, in a way that corporates find difficult.

### Making a difference

People benefit from seeing the difference they're making - they need to get away from their desks.

It's important to focus on the fact that the work you're doing is genuinely life-changing, so encourage people to get out of the office and see the good they're doing for themselves. The end result of a charity's mission is what makes each charity unique, and it's important that people are involved in what the charity stands for. It creates a pull that private-sector jobs can't beat - even with higher salaries and sweeter perks.

Of equal importance is employing candidates who are truly invested in your mission, the people who are reading your publications, engaging with your charity, who have a stake in the outcome. It's important to focus on these candidates, as they are likely to stick around to help the charity achieve its goals. Fortunately, they are easy to tell apart from the candidates who take a quick look at the website before the job interview.

# How to retain your staff

**HR leaders in large voluntary-sector organisations discuss the challenges they face, and share the range of strategies they use to overcome them.**

Gone are the days when staff retention was just a nice-to-have policy designed to make charities fun places to work. Now, in a world of financial pressure and uncertainty, retaining talent is an organisational priority: your employees are essential to your mission, and they are expensive to replace.

Research shows that all sectors are focusing on staff retention. A recent report on resourcing and talent planning by the [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development \(CIPD\)](#) found that organisations anticipate a greater emphasis on developing more talent in-house, and retaining rather than recruiting staff.

The same report shows that prevailing trends could make this difficult, however. The median rate of labour turnover across all sectors increased, which could make retention tough for charities. So how are HR leaders in large voluntary-sector organisations coping?

The first hurdle is to find and hire the right candidates. Stella Cheetham, executive director of people and organisational development at [Dimensions](#), a charity with around 7,000 staff, advises those with vacancies to be honest and not to “over-sell” the job. “It is really important to strike a balance and let people know the really good things about the job,” she says, “but also the fact that there are some things that they might find difficult.”

Values-based recruitment is a brilliant way to attract people to your charity, and you can introduce it right at application phase. “The questions we ask people at application and interview are all about values,” says Cheetham. “One of our values is respect, so we would ask people, ‘Can you give us an example of a time where respect has been shown to you?’ or, ‘What might respect be for someone with a learning disability?’

“We also ask situational judgment questions where we give candidates a scenario and ask them how they would respond to that particular situation,” she says.

Values-based recruitment might also help to engage your teams in your charity’s mission, something many HR directors agree is a strong retention tool. At the [Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust](#) (WWT), Sheila Wilcox, head of people, ensures that every member of their 460-strong team understands how their role contributes

to the charity's conservation work using staff literature and a "new joiners' day", where all new recruits from across the organisation meet up and learn about the WWT.

Ongoing communication about impact is also a useful strategy to keep your teams engaged in your mission. Gill Staunton, Head of HR at the [British Heart Foundation](#) (BHF), is always on the lookout for opportunities "to show how people's work is supporting our charitable work", and she recently launched a new internal communications initiative, Talk Research, to help staff learn about the research that the charity funds.



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But it's not enough for teams to know that their work is helping the charity progress; opportunities for their own professional development are important, too. This can take many forms, including regular appraisals, personal development plans, training schemes and career development programmes. The "suite of digital learning" introduced at [Action For Children](#) supports their teams across the world. This programme combines in-house opportunities such as coaching and mentoring with external opportunities, such as studying for qualifications or apprenticeship schemes.

This investment in your talent needs to be carefully considered, especially when budgets are tight. Wilcox conducted a training needs analysis at WWT so she can map her spend against organisational requirements. At Dimensions, the business case for retention really hit home when Cheetham calculated that hiring one support worker cost the charity around £6,000.



The charity launched a career development programme, Aspire, after a staff survey found that teams felt there was insufficient support for people to develop. They have since supported some 250 employees through Aspire, and Cheetham says the return on investment has been incredibly strong. “The number of people who have gone on to be promoted or expanded their jobs has been quite astonishing,” she says.

In fact, 85% of managers at Dimensions have been internally promoted, according to Cheetham, and the BHF has similar ambitious targets. “At the moment we recruit 26% of our roles internally,” says Staunton, “but we’re aiming to increase this number to 30% by 2020.”

Open communications and cultures are essential to allow staff to have their say and give feedback. Staff surveys - a mainstay of employee engagement strategies - are widely used to inform retention strategies. Many charities also have employee groups. Some of these focus around an issue: Action For Children has a “range of staff networks” around topics such as gender and inclusion, but they can be more formal - at the WWT, a “staff representative body” meets with a member of the board and Wilcox every quarter.

These initiatives supplement strong line management, and there is a particular focus on ensuring managers have regular one-to-ones. “The most important focus for us has been to improve the quality of line management, so that all of our staff

and volunteers feel supported at work and appreciated," says Wilcox. "We have invested in management skills training over the past two years and in particular focused on improved communication with all of our team members."

This investment creates a virtuous circle for retaining senior managers. While many of our experts saw much less churn in more senior roles, such individuals have different training needs, with more focus on leadership and management.

Charities can also support staff retention in other, smaller, ways. Remuneration is an obvious one, but the consensus is to keep salaries competitive within the sector the charity operates in. "Our pay rates and other benefits are benchmarked within the voluntary sector," says the HR team at [Kidney Research UK](#). "Our policy is to position our pay levels at the median rate, based on local and national market data."

Margaret Guilfoyle at Action For Children has just finished a project to introduce a fair and transparent pay structure. Now she wants to tailor their offer. "We have generous annual leave, a pension scheme and can offer staff access to salary sacrifice schemes and retail offers," she says. "However, we recognise that different people value different things and we will be working to develop a more flexible benefits offer in the future."

Individuality is the name of the game when it comes to flexible working, too. While many charities offer this benefit, Cheetham warns against assuming all employees want it. "When people think about flexible working it tends to be all one way in giving the employee more flexibility about when they work," she says. "For us, it can be that, but it can also be the other way around, giving people a bit more certainty about when they are going to work."

Whatever means you use to engage staff, never forget that it is essential. "We recognise that we deliver our services via our people, and they are our greatest asset," says Guilfoyle.

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# Retention checklist (organisation wide)

This checklist is designed to give you a broad overview of your organisation's current retention situation, and highlight any important areas that need to be improved to maximise your chances of retaining valuable staff.

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## Areas for consideration

For each of the areas below, start by listing the things that your organisation already does, before coming up with other things you could be doing to maximise retention.

### Early engagement

	Currently doing	Areas for improvement
Job advertisements and descriptions accurate and effective		
Interview process includes values and expectations		
Onboarding process promotes benefits, values and impact		

### Sharing impact

	Currently doing	Areas for improvement
Connect with beneficiaries and demonstrating value of work		
Cross-department exposure to share knowledge		

## Supporting growth

	Currently doing	Areas for improvement
Learning and development opportunities		
Management training and growth plans		

## Important specifics

The following components are vital to your retention process. Get these things done as a priority if they're not yet in place.

## Supporting growth

	Tick	Action
Regular staff survey to gauge priorities		
Staff representative body to encourage communication		
Pay review to ensure salaries are competitive		
Benefits review to promote non-monetary perks		

## Notes

Record anything that doesn't fit perfectly in the template above.

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# Retention checklist (individual)

This checklist is designed to provide you with a clear understanding of an individual's needs and priorities. You can either use this template with employees as part of a regular review meeting, or within the HR team to identify areas of risk within your teams.

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## Basic information

Important context to help you interpret further data.

### Early engagement

	Answer (for specific individual)	How to use data (HR use)
Time in organisation		How does this compare against average duration?
Time in current role		Should this person be expecting progression?
Salary		How does this compare with the industry average?
Retention issues to date		Has this person expressed interested in moving on before?

# Retention checklist

For each of the activities below (all of which are known to improve retention rates) make notes of progress so far, as well as areas that require action. Areas marked ● should be prioritised and may require urgent attention.

## Early engagement

	Details	Action required
Connected with beneficiaries ●		
Training opportunities		
Opportunity for feedback		
Clear progression plan ●		
Salary and benefits review		
Discussed long-term career ambitions		
Clear understanding of values and charity mission ●		

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## Summary

Retention risk	Low / Medium / High	How likely is this person to leave in the next three months?
Priority actions required	Yes / No	Do you need to take action to support this person in one of the <span style="color: #e91e63;">●</span> areas?
(if yes) Deadline		When will this be completed?

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## Notes

Record anything that doesn't fit perfectly in the template above.