ACEVO and Mental Health First Aid England:

Workforce wellbeing in charities

Maisie Hulbert, November, 2020

acevo

imagine, inspire, improve

MHFA England

Contents

Foreword

One of the joys of the social sector is the passion and commitment of the people who work in it. Often, in part because that passion and commitment is rooted in personal experiences of the issues we are all trying to address, we can find ourselves fragile and vulnerable to poor mental health as a direct result of our work.

As sector leaders, we have an important role to play in ensuring workplaces are happy and healthy, our teams thrive, and our people are able to bring their whole selves to work. But we can only do that effectively if we ourselves are able to cope.

The challenges of being a CEO in the social sector also make it exciting and rewarding, but the difficulties are real and the impact on our lives considerable. We have to balance highly-prized authenticity and openness with reassuring competence and control even during the darkest times.

In drawing together a group of CEOs to discuss the mental health of the workforce, ACEVO and MHFAE helped us open a rich and rewarding stream of honest reflection. From these emerged some themes that we present here in the hope they will be helpful to other CEOs thinking about their wellbeing and that of their teams.

Jules Hillier, chair of the ACEVO and MHFA England working group

Executive summary

In November 2019, ACEVO and Mental Health First Aid England launched a project exploring how voluntary sector CEOs can support greater workforce wellbeing. The conversation developed from one focused on workforce wellbeing to one which explored the bigger picture of charity sector mental health, and the responsibility of boards to ensure leaders can support themselves in order to support others.

Working in the voluntary sector can be enormously demanding and requires deep resilience; for all sorts of reasons, the work can be emotional and distressing. And yet it is a huge privilege to serve causes and communities and witness the passion, dedication and skills within charity teams. To ensure all staff, volunteers and leaders get the support they deserve, charity CEOs should recognise how they can use their power to shift working cultures and support greater workforce wellbeing - as well as boards taking responsibility for ensuring leaders can access support networks for themselves. Now more than ever, leaders need to pay close attention to their own mental health if they are to thrive in the charity sector environment and model safe behaviours.

The group's main findings can be split into these key themes:

What makes it tough: the vulnerability of charity staff

Working in the voluntary sector can be very tough. Many staff face acute need on the frontline, support people in deep struggle and hardship and persist relentlessly with entrenched issues. Often, their commitment comes from lived experience of or a personal connection to an issue, and/or a profound sense of social justice, which can make their day-to-day work emotional, triggering or distressing. With the need to focus on frontline delivery and with resources so pressed, it is all too easy for the mental health of staff, volunteers and leaders to become secondary.

The impact on leaders

Leaders in the voluntary sector must balance the need for authentic honesty with taking very difficult organisational decisions that can have an impact on people's lives. Holding responsibility for workforce wellbeing, and the desire to compensate for the challenges of working in the sector, can be draining for CEOs. The scale of the challenges can feel overwhelming, and it is easy for leaders to feel they are 'not coping', that they 'should be stronger' and that everyone else is managing better than they are.

When the ground shifts

The operating environment for charities has suddenly changed. Many teams and communities are experiencing deep sadness, loss, isolation and fear as they witness growing need and falling income as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted that racialised and minoritized people within the charity sector have experienced serious harm for years which has not been addressed.

Times of crisis bring issues that have existed for decades in the sector into sharper focus. There is an opportunity as the sector builds back to assess how to make it safer for everyone.

Governance and strategy

Charities have never been more needed. There has never been more to do. The sector will not be able to meet these challenges unless the mental health of staff and leadership is prioritised. Boards play an important role in highlighting mental health as an organisational priority if organisations are to do their best work, ensuring that leaders know they are not alone by giving them the permission they need to reach out and share the load.

We hope this report will help leaders to understand their role in using their power to create healthier, safer cultures in organisations and to feel that they are not alone in the challenges that they face. As ever, talking openly and candidly about mental health is vital for all staff and volunteers, and we hope this report plays a useful role in those important conversations.
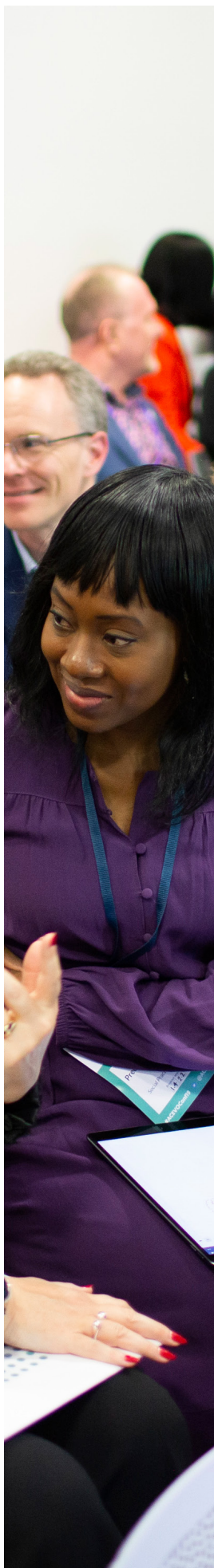
About us

ACEVO managed the selection of the working group, whose discussions form the basis of this report. The opportunity was advertised to ACEVO members via a call for expressions of interest circulated in ACEVO's weekly member newsletter, Leader to leader, and on ACEVO social media channels. The working group brought together CEOs from across a range of different organisations to discuss how CEOs can support their staff and volunteers alongside performance management and business interests. The final group met 4 times between December 2019 and July 2020. You can view the membership of the group here.

This report is based on conversational evidence from discussions between CEOs about their time working in the sector. We did not conduct formal research as part of this project, and this summary report is therefore not representative of the whole VCSE sector. However, we hope it contextualises why there are particular challenges around workforce well-being for the voluntary sector, and how leaders can use their power to drive change.

We welcome input and feedback on the report. Please contact Maisie Hulbert on maisie.hulbert@acevo.org.uk if you have any thoughts or contributions.

Charities and mental health

Working in charities is an opportunity for people to work for causes they care about. For many, this is precisely the reason that the sector appeals to them. Nonetheless, much research has shown that people who work in charities experience poor mental health and wellbeing. An anonymous survey of Unite members working in charities from May 2019 showed that 42% of respondents believed their job was not good for their mental health[1]. ACEVO and the Centre for Mental Health's report In Plain Sight investigated reports of abusive organisational cultures and reports of severe bullying within the charity sector. While the report does not explore the prevalence of bullying within the sector, 87% of those who did report it rated the impact on their personal and emotional wellbeing as severe.[2] In the leadership space, ACEVO's Pay and Equalities Survey has shown for many years that senior leaders in charities struggle to access personal

---

1 Unite the Union (2019) Charity workers suffering an epidemic of mental health issues and stress, survey reveals. Unite the Union, 20 May. Available at: https://unitetheunion.org/news-events/news/2019/may/charity-workers-suffering-an-epidemic-of-mental-health-issues-and-stress-survey-reveals/ [accessed 27 August 2020].
2 Fitzpatrick R and Thorne L (2019) In plain sight: workplace bullying in charities and the implications for leadership. ACEVO and Centre for Mental Health, June. Available at: https://www.acevo.org.uk/reports/in-plain-sight/ [accessed 9 October 2020].

support in their roles. In 2019 the survey found that 89% of CEOs worked extra, unpaid hours; the median number of extra hours worked was 10 per week[3]. In the 2020 survey, 32% reported receiving no regular appraisal, and just 22% of CEOs responding had a personal development plan. This survey also asked whether CEOs of charities felt that boards of trustees prioritised their wellbeing; while 54% said that they did, a mixed picture emerged,14% disagreed and almost a third (30%) neither agreed nor disagreed[4]. There is clearly a need for a more tailored approach to wellbeing in the sector, across all job levels within organisations, to help staff and volunteers feel safe and supported in their work.

Main findings

The vulnerability of charity staff

CEOs and senior managers in all sectors have a responsibility to care for staff in the working context. Health and safety regulations and employee protections such as the Disability Discrimination Act cover reasonable adjustments and sickness policies; organisations may also have their own initiatives, such as well-being representatives and support networks, to help staff manage their mental health. However, the working group identified some specific features of the voluntary sector that can make workforces particularly vulnerable to mental ill health, meaning targeted interventions from charity leaders to manage wellbeing may be necessary.

Charities exist for public benefit, and delivering their mission is their first priority. It is not uncommon for staff salaries to be dependent on specific pots of funding or contracts which can end at short notice. A consistent narrative in the media of poor public trust in charities and excessive spending often frames staff salaries as an unnecessary expense. This can embed anxieties about sustainability of roles and organisations, and contribute to high staff turnover.

People are often motivated to work for charities because of their passion for a cause. Their commitment can come from lived experience of or a personal connection to an issue, which can make their day-to-day work emotional, triggering or distressing. The sector greatly values lived experience within their workforce: a closeness to the issue within staff teams makes services more relevant and responsive to need. Staff with lived experience of the issue they are working on bring invaluable insight and expertise but may need additional support to cope with the demands of their workplaces on their wellbeing.

---

3 Guild M (2019) ACEVO Pay and Equalities Survey 2019. Association of Chief Executives of voluntary organisations. Available at: https://acevocommunity.force.com/s/store#/store/browse/detail/a303z000000FknHAAS [accessed 27 August 2020], p. 22
4 Guild M (2020) ACEVO Pay and Equalities Survey 2019. Association of Chief Executives of voluntary organisations, September. Available at: https://acevocommunity.force.com/s/store#/store/browse/detail/a303z0000030HNOAA2 [accessed 9 October 2020].

> **"**
> The issues that charities tackle can make all staff and volunteers vulnerable to trauma, and emotional support is essential to ensure people can carry out their work in ways which are safe for them.

For many potential employees, the charity sector's existence for social good may indicate that it is inclusive and promotes supportive working environments. The sector speaks regularly about being values-led, and those who know they experience poor mental health may be attracted to the sector because of this, especially if state provision is not meeting their needs. However, even if values are well-established they may still sit in tension with issues of resource that can create stress and anxiety for staff. For example, the NCVO Almanac 2020 showed that 52% of employees were missing the technical or specific skills necessary to perform their role[5], for many charities, unrestricted core funding that can be used for basic training to fill skills gaps and help staff feel confident in their work is scarce. Away days, retreats, individual counselling or coaching may be entirely out of reach. A warmer office with good plumbing and a better location may improve staff wellbeing, but is often not seen as a funding priority.

> **"**
> Leaders often feel the tension between putting a bit more money on the frontline or investing in the wellbeing of staff and volunteers.

Setting boundaries and managing expectations

Managing this tension is therefore one of the challenges leaders face. It is essential that CEOs set clear boundaries and manage staff expectations, while acknowledging their agency and power to foster and encourage the safest cultures possible.

Leaders can feel acute pressure to compensate for the challenges staff are experiencing, but in many cases this compensation is just not possible. There is a danger that leaders can assume a 'parenting' role, striving to provide staff with security, which can place emotional pressure on leaders without the organisational resource to follow through. Particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders found increased levels of anxiety in staff made their behaviour at times unpredictable, compounded by burnout due to cancelled annual leave.

---

5 National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2020) UK civil society Almanac 2020: Workforce. National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Available at: https://data.ncvo.org.uk/workforce/skills-and-training/#skills-gaps [accessed 27 August 2020].

While leaders cannot compensate for everything, it is important that they use their senior position to change culture and ensure clarity of communication to staff. Leaders can play a significant role in introducing appropriate channels through which staff can seek help. If certain things are unaffordable or out of scope, this should be acknowledged and explained to staff; the frameworks for reporting mental health difficulties should be clearly explained; and opportunities to contribute ideas and feedback on the kind of support on offer should be well-publicised. This is a tricky balance; the pressure should not always be on staff to articulate what they need or explain themselves, particularly in organisations with high levels of lived experience within the workforce, where these conversations can be draining. A good approach is to provide regular opportunities to feed in via existing structures such as staff surveys, for example. Ensuring honesty and transparency can help avoid cases where staff felt entitled to support which has been denied without proper explanation.

As leaders, modelling good behaviour can also be an important element of culture change, and leaders should speak regularly to their workforce about the importance of taking annual leave and utilising flexible working policies. Nonetheless, the inherent power dynamics of any organisation can make this challenging; staff may feel that there is a 'do as I say, not as I do' culture. Leaders should acknowledge that they know they can influence culture without intending to or even knowing that they do. Placing a consistent emphasis on healthy working cultures and showcasing how the organisation is working to enable them, can help change assumptions about power structures and employee access to flexibility.

This is complex and challenging work. Juggling business interests with staff health and their personal lives, especially given the acute instability of recent months, is never easy. It is important that any programme of well-being support includes clear avenues through which CEOs can also seek support, which we explore in the next section.

## The impact on leaders' wellbeing

Many leaders want to create cultures of openness and authenticity within their organisations. Staff should bring their whole selves to work; they should feel safe to express themselves and share their challenges, both personal and professional.

Modelling this kind of culture as a leader is difficult.

> " Leaders in all charities struggle to balance their visible humanity with being a trusted, confident leader who is able, when required, to make difficult decisions.

CEOs may feel that to be authentic, they should be honest and open – at the same time, it might not be appropriate to share business or personal struggles across the organisation. Expressing vulnerability and being approachable can mean feeling pressure to 'rescue' the people within the organisation who need support. These feelings are in constant tension for charity leaders. They feel acute pressure to be personable, and guilt when they cannot be.
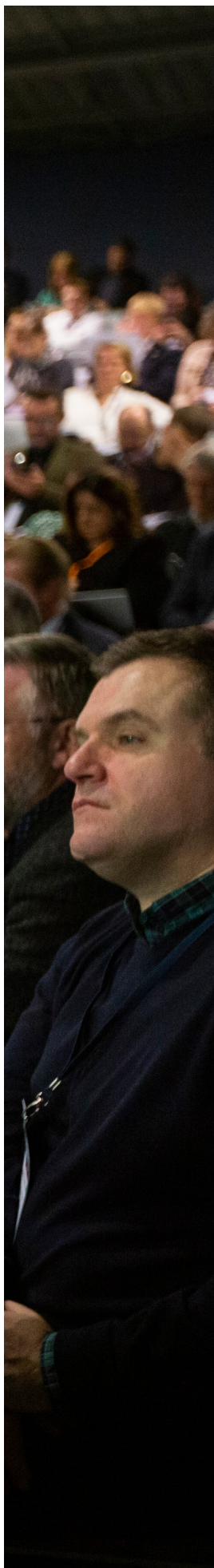
For CEOs this can be combined with feeling the pressure to put the organisation first and deliver as much as possible, especially as state support in areas such as social care, mental health and youth services has decreased while demand continues to rise. Pressure from donors to spend money wisely and media coverage about the 'privileges' of being a charity compounds the need to pursue the best working cultures possible, while delivering low-cost services and keeping overheads down. In many organisations the CEO is the only member of staff, and therefore this pressure is particularly acutely felt. Juggling so many key operational issues and organisational reputation often means that the last priority is CEO well-being.

There are also unique challenges around well-being and knowing what is normal for new CEOs. Most first-time CEOs will start in a smaller or perhaps younger organisation; these organisations can also lack infrastructure and second-in-command support. New CEOs may need to make very difficult decisions that directly impact staff wellbeing, especially if they join an organisation needing large-scale change. It is easy for first-time CEOs to attach shame to redundancies and restructuring, as they are simultaneously responsible for staff wellbeing but need to take decisions that may cause staff harm. For all CEOs, but particularly for CEOs doing this for the first time, spaces where they can seek reassurance from others in the same situation and know they are not alone are crucial.

The first steps to finding that reassurance is taking an individual responsibility to share your challenges visibly with other leaders. In some sense this enables CEOs to give one another 'peer permission' to switch off and leave work alone. This personal responsibility could manifest in many ways: it could be sharing with all staff that you are leaving early, or taking a mental heath day; it could be an email signature explaining that if you send emails late at night or at weekends, you will have already or will in the future take the time back; or it could be making the most of peer-learning events, setting up a WhatsApp group with other leaders to share experiences, or taking on a new hobby. Whatever you decide to do, talking about it really helps. Knowing we are not alone is the first step to changing our own situation.

The CEO role is unique - in most charities, the buck stops with the CEO. This is stressful and lonely, but also a role full of joy and pride.

> " Sustaining the CEO's positive energy in their role should be seen as a managerial responsibility of trustees. Even if they cannot monitor day-to-day operations, boards can take the lead on promoting positive organisational cultures, by granting leaders the permission needed to take time off, support themselves, and in times of crisis share the load.

We explore the role of governance and strategy later in this report.

When the ground shifts

Leaders can have systems and processes in which everyone feels supported, but the external environment is out of their control. Managing huge changes to the ways in which a charity can work, as well as taking care of themselves, is an issue that has taken on new significant for leaders in recent months for a variety of reasons.

The coronavirus pandemic has hit charities and the people they work with particularly hard. Charities have sought to continue and sometimes expand services and support for communities in real need, at the same time as fundraising income has plummeted and the future of organisations has become suddenly uncertain. Many charities providing services have needed to adapt at speed to respond to the disproportionate impact of the virus on certain groups. Disabled people have experienced particular challenges as a result of the pandemic, with Inclusion London finding that 60% of over 300 disabled people surveyed had struggled to access basic necessities like food and medicine[6]. Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that the crisis hit the incomes of the poorest households the most[7], and Black Asian and Minoritised Ethnic (BAME) communities experienced disproportionately high coronavirus infection and mortality rates[8]. Although the pandemic has been challenging for everyone in some way, it has not affected everyone equally.

High levels of home working have blurred the boundaries between personal and professional lives, and leaders' control over their authenticity and personality has been disrupted. The reliable touchpoints for organisations to check in with their people – such as face-to-face working – have disappeared. This has meant that mental health has quickly been impacted. The Office for National Statistics found that the number of adults with depression doubled during the crisis to 19.2%[9]; the charity Mind found that nearly two-thirds (60%) of people

6 Inclusion London (2020) Abandoned, forgotten and ignored: The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled people. Inclusion London, June. Available at: https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Abandoned-Forgotten-and-Ignored-Final-1.pdf [accessed 27 August 2020].
7 Bourquin P, Delestre I, Joyce R, Rasul I and Waters T (2020) The effects of coronavirus on household finances and financial distress. Institute for Fiscal Studies, June. Available at: https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14908 [accessed 27 August 2020].
8 Butcher B and Massey J (2020) Why are more people from BAME backgrounds dying from coronavirus? British Broadcasting Corporation, 19 June. Available at: t [accessed 27 August 2020]
9 Duncan P and Butler P (2020) Depression in British adults doubles during coronavirus crisis. The Guardian, 18 August. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/aug/18/depression-in-british-adults-doubles-during-coronavirus-crisis [accessed 27 August 2020].

reported that their mental health had worsened during the pandemic.[10] For many leaders it has been challenging to give time and support to staff when their organisation might face closure and their own support needs are not being met.

During the coronavirus pandemic leaders have felt particularly intense pressure to have all the answers for staff and boards, while also dealing with the complications of caring responsibilities, anxiety about illness, and the general anxieties about the pandemic we have all felt. They describe a sense of loss for the organisation they had built and cared for, which has been destabilised by something out of their control. This gives rise to feelings of shame that they could not cope with the collision of personal and professional, and put the organisation first. Due to outdated notions of leadership, when personal lives are on display, many associate this with weakness as a leader.

For user-led organisations this tension is particularly intense, as many are experiencing the same needs for support as their beneficiaries. CEOs who are also users of services may feel that by leading the cause or campaign, they give up a right to a personal voice to share needs and experiences which is replaced by an overwhelming responsibility to get that support right for others. In particularly niche areas this can leave leaders without the support they need, which may only be accessible through one charity's work. When the ground shifts and communities are left behind or ignored, it is particularly challenging for CEOs with lived experience of their organisations' causes to separate the personal and professional.

The sector has seen a marked shift in conversations about 'race' and racism. The murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 mobilised widespread protests from the Black Lives Matter movement and highlighted racism across the world. For Black people this time has been extremely painful, and is another wakeup call for white leaders to the racism that exists in society, and which the sector reflects. Many Black leaders have recognised that organisations they have supported and whose reputations they have protected for years have perpetrated racism. Black staff and leaders have felt a need to protect organisations from reputational damage in the name of social good. Others have been reporting for years but have never been heard. Calls for ring-fenced funding to resource targeted services from BAME-led charities during coronavirus have been widely supported, although it is unclear whether it has happened in practice. There is new momentum for charities to move from talk to meaningful

---

10 Mind (2020) Nearly two thirds of people in England say that their mental health has got worse during lockdown, Mind announces as it reopens thirty-five charity shops across the country. Mind, 15 June. Available at: https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/nearly-two-thirds-of-people-in-england-say-that-their-mental-health-has-got-worse-during-lockdown-mind-announces-as-it-reopens-thirty-five-charity-shops-across-the-country/ [accessed 27 August].

action, and to address the harm caused to Black people, and all racialised and minoritised people, within the sector. Despite the challenges of coronavirus and other priorities, it is essential that the presence of racism in the sector is no longer viewed as someone else's problem and that all CEOs, chairs and trustees advance their work in this area to make the sector safer for everyone.

The ground has shifted on issues which have significant implications for the well-being of staff. Providing time and space to reflect on the enormity of these changes, and how they have worsened the situation for our organisations and people, is important. However, this project has made clear that these are not new issues; times of crisis have simply brought them into sharper focus. Issues of poor workforce mental health within charities existed before the crisis, and the sector has had a poor record on racism for decades.

> " As organisations rebuild, there is an opportunity to rethink how we make this sector safe for everyone by truly reassessing our priorities and the kind of sector we want to be.

Recommendations

Governance and strategy

The group felt that overall, board responsibility for mental health within organisations could be stronger. Charity boards are usually made up of volunteers, with skills in particular areas. They are often not operational and may not have a strong visible presence in offices or staff meetings. Nonetheless, trustees have ultimate responsibility for the charity and how it is run, and officially 'manage' the CEO. In a culture where leaders hold responsibility for business interests, staff well-being and the privilege of being part of the charity sector, they feel they need permission from someone to take this time. The CEO sets these policies for the organisation; boards should also set them for CEOs.

During the Covid-19 pandemic the need for good governance became more pronounced than ever. Relationships between boards and CEOs were strained by intense pressure on personal lives and organisations, and those with ultimate responsibility for the organisation – and thus the staff and beneficiaries related to it – were volunteers with other responsibilities. For so many organisations this governance arrangement was simply not fit for purpose; many CEOs said their trustees and chair did not even ask how they were. The level of pressure placed on an individual in times of crisis is untenable, and there is a clear need for more compassionate, sensitive and flexible governance in many organisations.

> **"** Boards have a responsibility to make sure that every staff member, including the CEO, knows who they should ask and what they are entitled to if they need adjustments or other support.

ACEVO's report In Plain Sight explored bullying in the charity sector, and how to make the sector more generally a safer, happier place to work. One of the recommendations was:

> **"** While safeguarding, staff wellbeing and workplace culture remain the collective responsibility of boards, chief executives and senior leadership teams, charities should nominate at least one trustee and one senior manager to lead on staff workplace wellbeing.

The group supports this recommendation. By taking senior level responsibility for workplace culture and staff well-being, boards can ensure this issue remains high on the agenda as charities build back.

The working group discussed the questions boards could ask themselves to assess the well-being of their organisation as the sector builds back from coronavirus, and to be more aware of the support staff might need. Some ideas included:

1. Is one of your trustees responsible for mental health and well-being in the organisation? Is this responsibility included elsewhere, perhaps under HR?
2. Do you have agreed policies for managing workforce mental health difficulties?
3. Have you spoken about including mental health in your organisational strategy?
4. When did you last ask your CEO about their mental health, with a genuine interest in their answer and with enough time to design a support package together?
5. Do you support your CEO to engage in peer learning, personal development or other opportunities to share challenges as part of their day job?

Answering these questions alone will not solve the problem; there is still likely to be work to do. Every board will need to liaise with their CEO to work out the best approach for them and the organisation concerned, but prioritising this area and investing time and energy in it moving forward will prepare organisations and their people better for future challenges.

Potential future work

The initial exploration from this working group about supporting workforce mental health exposed some deeper issues about the fragility of the sector and the position of the CEO, and governance structures within charities. The working group will be taking forward ideas for future work, some of which are below.

- Exploring governance systems change through a sector wide discussion about how governance structures can exacerbate or better support mental health and wellbeing
- Forming a sector wide mental health charter, with 'mirror' responsibilities for chairs and CEOs
- More facilitated peer learning, similar to the member meetings ACEVO has facilitated during coronavirus, as a safe space in which to share
- A self-assessment tool for organisations with questions for boards, CEOs and workforce to gain a 360 well-being assessment
- Communications about the shared experiences and concerns for CEOs, to emphasise that they are not alone
- Continue focus on advancing anti-racism across the charity sector, emphasising the importance of well-being support for staff who have experienced racism
- Influencing the next review of the Charity Governance Code, to encourage strategic awareness and responsibility for workforce well-being

We hope that this short report will help the sector to start conversations about mental health in a more honest and open way. Further communication and discussion will raise the profile of the issue, enabling CEOs to think and speak differently about the wellbeing of their teams, and their own mental health. If you have any further suggestions about where this work could go next, please do get in touch.

Images by: **rawpixel.com** and **unsplash.com**