

SMALLWOODTRUST

Enabling women to be financially resilient



Board Shadowing Programme

Three-Year Evaluation

July 2026

Introduction

Between 2022 and 2025, Smallwood Trust piloted a Board Shadowing Programme designed to demystify governance and shift perceptions of trusteeship among women with lived experience of financial hardship and systemic barriers. This evaluation synthesises insights from three cohorts, providing a practical framework for funders and charities considering similar initiatives.

The programme allowed participants to observe board meetings, access mentoring from trustees, and receive bursaries to support their personal development. It aimed to ground learning in real governance practice whilst creating pathways to wider opportunities.

This external evaluation, by Anj Handa of Inspiring Women Changemakers, focuses on structural design principles, governance considerations, and implementation insights that proved transferable across contexts. It reflects on what worked, what did not, and what organisations need to consider before launching their own programmes.



Board Shadowing Programme timeline

2021



Pilot programme launched with three shadowees

Year One **Establishing the Foundations**

- Strong relational support from Board member Ambreen Shah and CEO Paul Carbury
- Shadowees gained confidence, sector insight, and exposure to ethical governance
- Programme gained sector recognition and visibility

2022



Second cohort recruited with four shadowees

Year Two **Deepening Engagement**

- Cohort expanded
- Shadowees actively participated in Board discussions and grant panels
- Coaching introduced
- Programme featured in Governance magazine and other charity sector media

2024



Third cohort of four shadowees

Year Three **Deepening Engagement**

- Mentoring offered (but inconsistently taken up)
- Shadowees involved in strategic discussions and grant panels
- Programme sustained despite internal leadership transitions
- Continued emphasis on lived experience as a strategic asset

2025



Evaluation & governance integration recommendations presented to the board



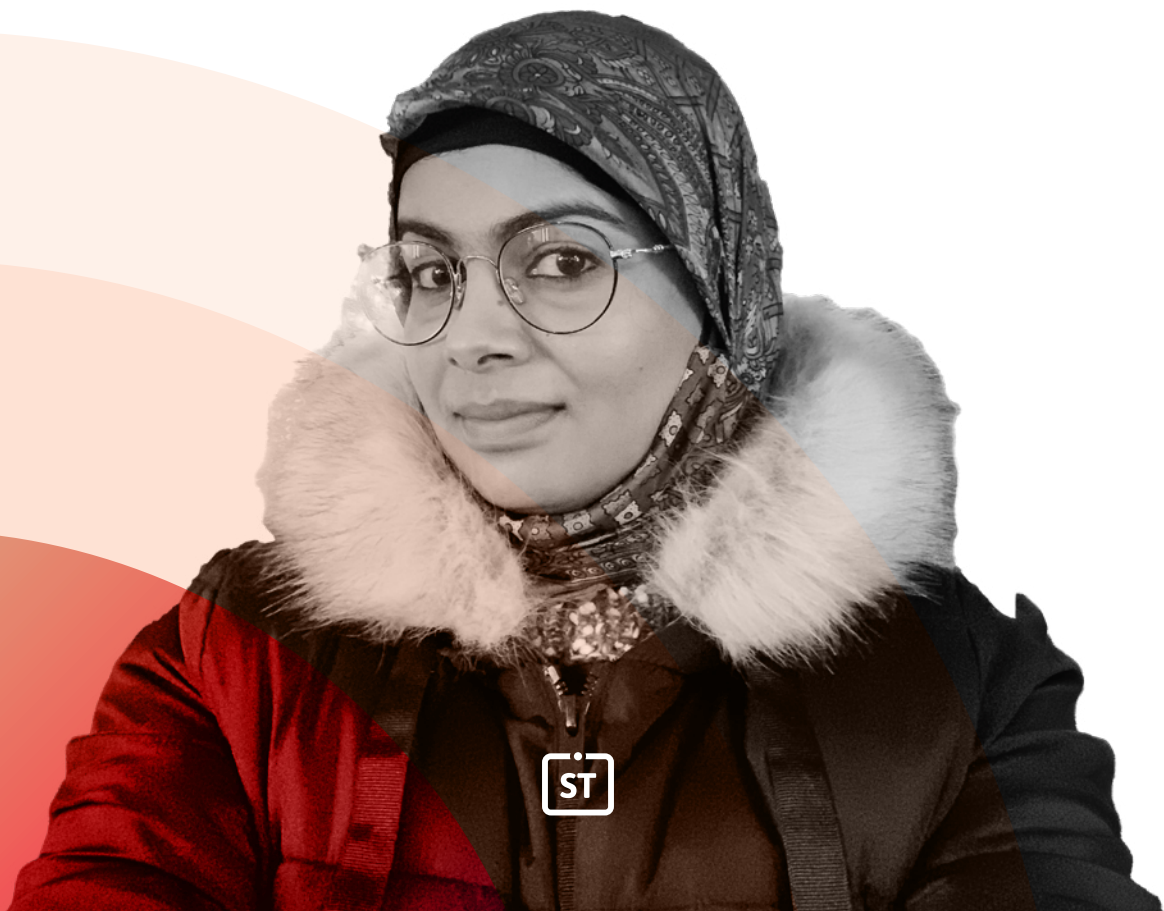
Programme Overview

Core Structure

- 12-month shadowing placement observing board and committee meetings
- Pre-board briefings with CEO and link Board member Ambreen Shah
- Unconditional individual bursaries for Shadowees' personal development
- Access to confidential board papers and strategic discussions
- Expenses reimbursement for travel and childcare
- Opportunity to join grants panels and access learning opportunities
- One-to-one mentoring from board members

Participant Profile

Eleven women participated across three years. Applicants were asked to indicate their lived experience; detailed personal disclosure was voluntary. They primarily worked in not-for-profit organisations and grassroots advocacy. Participants brought lived experience across multiple domains including financial hardship, migration, disability, and systemic exclusion. The board itself included members with lived experience of financial hardship, reflecting broader representation than the programme alone suggested.



“ This experience was an invaluable insight to understand what happens behind the opaque doors of trusteeship. This is crucial to educating others about charities, and also, increasing trust in organisations that support so many people. ”

- **Nikki Iyayi**



“ By being included in this process, I feel more confident about bringing my own experience, my lived experience and my work experience to another organisation. ”

- **Ciiku Sondergaard**

“ The experience has been amazing for my confidence and it's been so valuable to see how an organisation like Smallwood works behind closed doors and makes decisions. ”

- **Shana Begum**



“ It's not an exaggeration to say it was life-changing. It has been a great learning experience and it was good to meet the other Board members and learn how they use their different knowledge and perspectives to help make collective decisions. ”

- **Saira Shahzadi**

“ I've found the Smallwood team very supportive and inclusive! Ambreen and Paul have been so welcoming and approachable, explaining the processes and providing many opportunities for personal development. ”

- **Jessica Stott**



“ My image of a Board before joining Smallwood was that of a closed off group of people, and the programme has opened up a space that feels welcoming and truly values women's lived experiences in its decision making. ”

- **Rachel Brown**

Key Findings

What Worked

- Aligned with organisational mission: scheme was embedded in Smallwood Trust's strategy
- Demystifying governance: Participants reported increased confidence in understanding how boards function and make decisions
- Creating relationships: The programme enabled meaningful connections across professional networks that participants would not otherwise access
- Practical learning: Observing real governance processes proved more valuable than theoretical training alone
- Board reflection: The presence of shadowees prompted trustees to examine their own dynamics, speaking patterns, and inclusion practices
- Sector visibility: The programme raised Smallwood Trust's profile as an organisation committed to inclusive governance

Critical Challenges

- Clarity of purpose: The programme evolved year-on-year. While this flexibility was intentional, it resulted in conflicting views on whether it was primarily a light-touch exposure model as originally intended, or a leadership development initiative.
- Structure: Onboarding, mentoring frameworks, and support varied across cohorts
- Governance tensions: Board discussions occasionally became less robust when shadowees were present, with some board members modifying their contributions
- Power dynamics: Time constraints and knowing the appropriate points to ask questions limited ability of shadowees to engage during meetings. This highlighted structural barriers to inclusive participation
- Resource dependencies: The programme relied on the CEO and individual trustees rather than organisational infrastructure
- Limited accessibility: Complex board papers and robust discussions necessary for a grant maker of Smallwood Trust's scale created some barriers despite best intentions

Governance Considerations for Organisations

Organisations considering board shadowing programmes face a fundamental question: will the presence of observers enhance or constrain board effectiveness? This tension requires honest reflection on board culture and decision-making norms.

Board Readiness

Boards must be willing to examine their own dynamics. Smallwood Trust discovered that creating space for rigorous debate whilst maintaining a relational learning environment required intentional cultural work. Board members valued the inclusive ethos but noted that discussions occasionally took longer or became less challenging when shadowees were present. This is not necessarily problematic, but it requires acknowledgment and strategic management.

Strategic Alignment

The programme must serve organisational mission. For the Smallwood Trust, board shadowing aligned directly with its commitment to women's financial resilience by creating governance pathways. Organisations should articulate how shadowing advances their specific strategic objectives rather than adopting it as a general good practice.

Resource Commitment

Board shadowing requires approximately 3-4 hours trustee/CEO time per board meeting for mentoring, contextualising papers, and relationship-building. Organisational infrastructure such as coordinator support, accessible materials, and structured onboarding proved essential. Relying on the goodwill of board members creates dependency risks and inconsistent experiences.



Recommendations for Implementation

1. Define Purpose Clearly

Decide whether the programme is a structured leadership development initiative or a light-touch exposure model. These require different resources, timescales, and participant commitments.

2. Build Consistent Infrastructure

- Standardised onboarding covering board culture, confidentiality expectations, and governance basics
- Clear mentoring frameworks with defined expectations for both mentors and mentees
- Accessible board papers with glossaries and context-setting briefings
- Designated coordinator role for operational support and participant queries
- Co-created group agreements establishing shared expectations and boundaries

3. Address Power Dynamics Explicitly

Create mechanisms for surfacing rather than smoothing over governance tensions. Smallwood Trust identified unequal speaking time and limited questioning as structural issues requiring board-level intervention, not individual behaviour modification. Organisations should anticipate similar dynamics and build reflection mechanisms into programme design.

4. Embed Accessibility from the Start

- Plain language summaries of complex papers
- Pre-meeting briefings for context-setting
- Clear expense claim processes without bureaucratic barriers
- Flexible meeting formats recognising caring responsibilities and health needs
- Technology and location choices that minimise exclusion

5. Measure what Matters

Define success metrics before launch. Consider both participant outcomes such as governance literacy and confidence, and organisational outcomes including board culture shifts and sector influence. Smallwood Trust identified a ripple effect: the impact of the programme extended beyond Shadowees progressing onto boards and brought about broader governance capacity-building and organisational learning.

Conclusion

Board shadowing programmes offer genuine potential for democratising governance and creating pathways to board roles for underrepresented groups. However, success requires more than good intentions. Organisations must be prepared to examine their own board dynamics, build a proper infrastructure for their programme, and address structural barriers to inclusion.

The Smallwood Trust's experience demonstrates that the most valuable learning occurs when boards are willing to change themselves, not just develop others. The programme's legacy lies as much in the internal governance reflections it prompted as in the individual participants it supported.

For funders and charities considering similar initiatives, the question is not whether board shadowing can work, but whether your organisation is ready to do the deeper cultural work it requires.

For an informal discussion on developing board shadowing programmes that address power dynamics and structural inclusion barriers, contact Anj Handa at anj@inspiringwomenchangers.co.uk.





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