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Paid or unpaid: that is the question
(or how the public is more likely to think that trustees are paid than fundraisers)

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Summary

A representative sample of the UK population was asked¹ to identify which of a variety of groups involved with charities was paid or unpaid. The results showed that while the public was right about whether directors and chief executives were paid (around 90% thought they were definitely or probably paid) far less accuracy was seen for trustees and fundraisers (only 8% thought trustees were definitely unpaid and only 6% thought fundraisers were definitely paid). Indeed more thought that trustees are paid than fundraisers.

The background

The Charity Awareness Monitor (CAM) researches public attitudes to charities eight times a year through a mixture of telephone and panel (i.e. postal) surveys. In November 2003 a question was put on the monitor asking which of a range of groups involved in charities were paid or unpaid (the options were: definitely paid, probably paid, not sure, probably unpaid, and definitely unpaid). The groups asked about were: directors, chief executives, presidents, patrons, fundraisers, helpers in charity shops, staff, trustees and volunteers. One of the inspirations for this question is the current debate about whether trustees should be paid and the argument that *'the sector's voluntary principle of trusteeship is vital in maintaining public trust and confidence in charities'*². We wanted to understand whether the public had such a clear idea of who was and wasn't paid in charities as this policy suggests that they should. However it is fair to say that the results were surprising in a whole variety of ways!

The results

Figure 1 shows the public's judgements on which groups were paid or unpaid (where the percentages don't add to 100% it is because of a small number who didn't answer the question). Public response can be divided broadly in three areas.

Getting it about right: directors, chief executives and volunteers

There are three groups where the public's understanding of who is paid or unpaid is broadly in line with reality: directors, chief executives and volunteers. Nearly 90% of the public thought that volunteers were unpaid (with 59% thinking they were definitely unpaid). Similarly 90% thought that chief executives were paid and 87% thinking that directors were paid. So far so good.

Broadly right – but with some uncertainty: patrons, staff and charity shop helpers

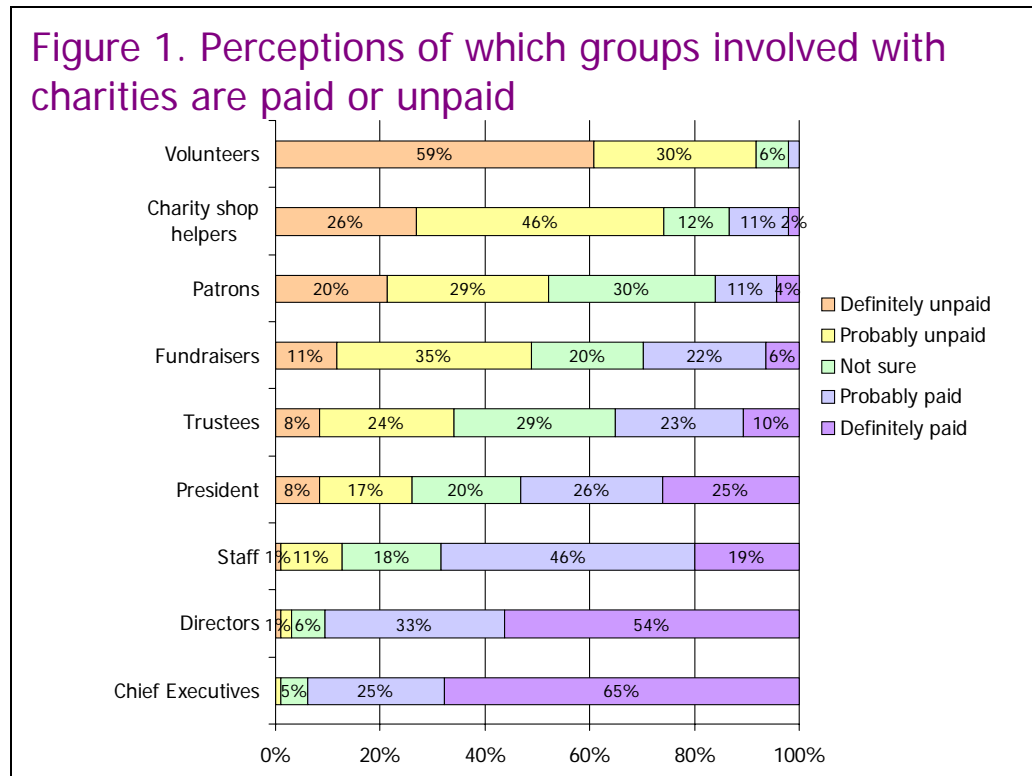
The next cluster are those groups where the majority are on the right track, but with a substantial minority who are confused: staff, charity shop helpers and patrons. As figure 1 shows two-thirds of the public think that charity staff are paid, however 18% aren't sure and another 12% think they are unpaid.

¹ Carried out through the NFO group's research panel (now part of TNS) with 984 respondents representative of the UK population

² Letter from NCVO's director of public policy to Third Sector, 17 September 2003

About 50% of respondents thought that patrons were unpaid, but a further 30% weren't sure and 15% thought they were paid. As far as we know no patrons are paid.

The picture with charity shop helpers is more complex since while the majority of helpers are volunteers, many charity shop managers are paid. This mixture is reflected in the public's answers. Over 70% think that charity shop helpers are unpaid, but 12% are unsure, and 13% think they are paid. In future we will separate the two categories.



Confusion reigns: trustees, fundraisers and presidents

The last group is those where the public's view is, put simply, out of touch with reality. Presidents, like patrons, aren't paid (well that's what we think). However half the public think that presidents are paid. Perhaps this isn't surprising since George Bush is paid and the western world takes its lead from the US president. However it does mean that while a charity maybe chuffed to have a high profile voluntary president committed to their cause, half the public (and another 20% who aren't sure) think that the charity has got another fat cat on the payroll.

The situation is even worse for fundraisers and trustees. Only 8% of the public think that trustees are definitely unpaid and only 5% of the public think that fundraisers are definitely paid. Overall 33% think that trustees are paid (and 29% are unsure). Only 28% think fundraisers are paid and 46% think they are unpaid. **Put simply more people think that trustees are paid than think that fundraisers are paid.** Yet trustees can't be paid and most fundraisers are paid.

What does it all mean for charities?

The public has some hazy and often mistaken understandings of who is and isn't paid within charities. In some cases, as with staff, it is nearly right. But in others it is fundamentally and crucially mistaken. Voluntary trusteeship is for many a defining principal of the sector and seen as a foundation of public trust and confidence. Yet this research appears to call into question whether voluntary trusteeship can play any role in public trust because public understanding is so out of touch with the reality: that trustees aren't and can't be paid.

Fundraising has developed enormously as a profession and an activity over the last twenty years. More charities fundraise than ever before. And the public are well aware of fundraising activities. However as fundraising has developed the public has continued to see it as a 'cottage industry' and this is reflected in the low degree of understanding that fundraising is now largely a paid profession. This is probably compounded by the fact that much of the public contact with fundraising is with volunteer fundraisers (or people assumed to be volunteers).

It would be possible to argue that of course we can't expect the public to understand charities perfectly, but those who are more involved do understand the situation more accurately. An analysis of the data shows that the understanding of people with a direct debit or standing order to a charity (about 22% of the total) is more accurate than the population as a whole – but not massively. So 35% of committed givers think that fundraisers are paid (compared to 28% for the public as a whole) and 45% of committed givers think that trustees are unpaid (compared to 32% for the public as whole).

But why would the public (or committed givers) know that trustees aren't paid and fundraisers are? Who is telling them? How would they find out? It would take the most avid reader of annual reports to know that trustees aren't paid (and nor are presidents or patrons). And as for fundraisers being paid.....they'd have read the jobs ads in the Guardian on a Monday or Wednesday!

The lesson in all of this for charities is clear. Nothing can be taken for granted about the public's understanding of charities – even if people within the sector take it for granted or hold it up as a fundamental truth.

If the sector wants the public (or donors or other stakeholders) to understand how charities work it has to communicate that to them, remorsefully, week in, week out, through every medium available and at every opportunity. And when the sector is sick of hearing those messages to the point of nausea, the public might just about have got the message.

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