

## What does being a Patron mean?

If you are thinking of asking someone to be a patron for your organisation, or someone has offered to be a patron for you, this fact sheet provides a quick rundown of what a patron is and what can be expected of them.

### What is a patron?

*'Patrons: generally refers to well known or illustrious individuals who lend their name and support to the organisation, who may or may not have membership rights.'*  
(The Russell-Cooke Voluntary Sector Legal Handbook)

Patrons are generally non-members. They tend to be someone who agrees to lend their name to your organisation as a way of supporting you, usually because they are well known and able to get media coverage for your organisation and/or bring in donations.

As they agree to lend their name, patrons tend to represent causes they feel passionately about.

### How are Patrons different to members?

An organisations governing document (constitution or Memorandum and Articles of Association) will clearly define who that organisations members are. They may be individuals or other organisations, which have rights and obligations and a constitutionally defined role in the organisation. There may a number of levels of membership.

In some cases they act as the governing body itself, or more commonly as the people who elect all or most of the governing body.

Members must be distinguished from others, such as supporters, service users, participants etc., who may call themselves 'members' but do not have a constitutional role in the organisation.

The governing document may provide for some non-members to have rights similar to those of members, for example the right appoint some officers or members of the governing body, to attend meetings or to approve constitutional changes. Non-members with such rights might include honorary members or patrons, a president, funders or other outside bodies.



### Would a patron be good for your organisation?

Patrons are normally well-known and respected, perhaps in the field in which you work or in another field (celebrities for example). They can therefore help lend credibility to your cause or help you to get noticed, through the media.

They may appear in media campaigns or on your website. Some may appear in fundraising events such as the London Marathon for your organisation.

Ideally all of the positive attributes of your patron will rub off on your organisation.

Examples of patrons:

- Angelina Jolie for UNICEF
- Kate Middleton for Place2Be, SportsAid and The Natural History Museum
- Fiona Bruce, Dame Helen Mirren and Patrick Stewart amongst others for Refuge
- David Cameron is a patron of 29 organisations, including the European Union Youth Orchestra

## Are all patrons the same?

Patrons fall into a number of categories, and each can help in a different way. Therefore you need to think carefully about what you want your patron to do and what is in the best interests of your organisation and beneficiaries:

- A celebrity can help you raise your public profile by getting you media attention, taking part in fundraising events etc.
- A politician can help you open doors and make you more credible to many people. Although be careful not to get your organisation involved with any particular political party, that you may appear to be campaigning for.
- A scientist or expert in your area of work will lend credibility.
- An establishment figure (such as a royal) may do all of the above.

## How to get a patron

- Firstly, your governing body needs to think carefully about what a patron could do for the organisation and what sort of patron would be best for the organisation.
- This may take a while to pinpoint exactly what you want a patron to do but it is important to have those conversations. Generally, you should do this before you shortlist possibilities. However, if someone has approached you, you must still have these conversations to examine whether or not they are the right person and what you would then like them to do.
- Target likely individuals. For instance, someone who has the right expertise. If it is a celebrity do a bit of research on those you are thinking of to find out if they are likely to support your cause or not. Also check if they are already patrons as they may not want to take on another role.
- Approach the individuals with a letter that set outs who you are, what the organisation does and what you would expect of a patron. If possible, make use of anyone associated with the organisation who has a credible link to the possible patron to make the initial approach.
- Follow up the initial approach with offers to meet them, invitations to events, open days or activities.
- Make a clear proposal in writing.
  - If 'yes' follow up with a conversation clarifying expectations from both sides. Once everybody knows exactly where they would stand and the patron has had a chance to ask questions etc., and then put in writing in a letter of agreement.
  - If 'no' thank them for their interest and ask if there is some other way that would like to contribute (i.e. donation of money, item to be auctioned, etc.).

## Can an organisation have more than one?

Yes. An organisation can have as many patrons' as it wishes!

But be clear as to why you need more than one and make sure that potential patrons and any current patron(s) are clear as well.

## What does a patron do?

A patron can do as little or as much as you agree with them. Generally they simply put their name to your cause – you may have their profile on your website and that is all.

Exactly what the patron does varies from situation to situation so clarify expectations in a letter of agreement at the start of the relationship.

If you do expect your Patron to perform any specific function (such as open the AGM or chair an annual fundraising event) then it is vital that this is absolutely clear and agreed to in writing.

## Responsibilities

Generally patrons are not trustees/management committee members so they do not attend meetings (although they can observe meetings if the organisation and patron wished) and do not carry any responsibilities or liabilities. They certainly do not make decisions on behalf of your organisation. Make sure that this point is clarified in the initial letter of agreement.

## What could go wrong?

As in all relationships things can go wrong.

For example:

- The patron may want more authority in the organisation than they really have; or
- Once you get a patron you are not sure what to do with them.
- The patron and organisation may lose touch over time
- Patron may lose some of their value i.e. celebrity status fades, political contacts go stale etc.
- Patron becomes a liability (negative press, involvement in scandal and so on)

As long as you are clear about what being a patron means and you have had the right internal conversations, as well as conversations with your patron most situations can be cleared up easily.

Staying in touch can be simple, even more so with social media: add the patron to your newsletter, on twitter, Facebook etc. if you can. But don't forget the personal touch matters – phone them and/or write to them a least once a year. Make sure they also receive your latest annual report and good news stories so they have something to talk about if asked.

However, some Patrons (such as musicians and actors who tour incessantly) may in practice be out of contact for long periods. Using their name and photo may still be worthwhile. However, if you wish to end the relationship follow the steps in the agreement letter.

A Patron who seems of little value poses a dilemma. Provided they are not having a negative impact it may be worth hanging onto them until you can recruit a new patron. And even an obscure patron can help lend some credibility to your organisation. If you do decide to change patrons, to save face you can give the old Patrons the title Emeritus Patron or Former Patron and still invite them to an event each year.

A patron who becomes a liability should be dropped as soon as possible (this would constitute 'exceptional circumstances' and the notice period set out in the model letter of agreement would not apply). A patron should boost the organisations reputation, not allow it to suffer.

Bear in mind that in practice this may be difficult if their photo is on the cover of the annual report, and their name on your letterhead, though it will be easy enough to remove them from your website.

While this may be harder to do in practice, always remember that your beneficiaries come first and if a patron could in anyway damage the services your provide or your relationship with your beneficiaries, then it is best to end that relationship.

## Case Study

- The Guardian, January 2012 - [Why charities and celebrity patrons are a winning combination](#): Jonathan Pryce discusses his experiences as a celebrity charity patron, and what it takes to make the relationship work
- The Guardian, January 2012 - [Best bits: Working with celebrity charity patrons](#): Kate Hodge rounds up our experts' advice on how to handle celebrity patrons, whatever the size of your organisation

## Resources

- [Governance Pages](#): Patron proposal and agreement letter templates
- [Governance Pages](#): Patron agreement letter sample
- [UK Fundraising](#): How do I recruit celebrity patrons
- [Charity Links](#): How to get charity patrons

## Support

If you would like any support with governance and leadership or any other issues facing your organisation, please contact the Development Team at Community Southwark:

[development@communitysouthwark.org.uk](mailto:development@communitysouthwark.org.uk) or 020 7358 7020