A glimpse into ACEVO's Pay and Equalities Survey data on socioeconomic background (2022-24)

The ACEVO Pay and Equalities Survey is the most comprehensive source of data on charity CEO pay, benefits and leadership development. It has provided sector leaders with essential insights into trends and challenges in governance, renumerations, diversity and representation.

Each year, the survey draws upon the experiences of hundreds of charity chief executives who respond to it across England and Wales, and Scotland and Northern Ireland through our partners at ACOSVO and CO3. It highlights key patterns linked to gender, race, disability and organisational structures, enabling leaders to benchmark their organisations and make more informed, equitable decisions.

This briefing focuses on just one element of the findings from the 2022, 2023 and 2024 reports: the socio-economic background of charity CEOs who responded. It looks at:

- parents gaining a university degree
- type of secondary school attended
- eligibility for free school meals

The 2022, 2023 and 2024 surveys each included a question on the occupation of the main household earner. However, in 2024 the question was rephrased and respondents could choose to leave it blank. As a result, usable data are only available for 2022 and 2023. For the full dataset, alongside the analysis of these trends and many others, the Pay and Equalities Survey reports are available for purchase. The next edition will be published in November 2025.

Parents' education at the time the charity leader was 18 years old

YEAR	ONE OF THE PARENTS HAD A DEGREE	NEITHER HAD A DEGREE	UNSURE	PREFER NOT TO SAY
2022	31%	66%	1%	2%
2023	33%	65%	1%	2%
2024	33%	65%	1%	2%

Most charity CEOs come from non-graduate family backgrounds and this pattern has remained stable over the past three years. Around one-third of respondents reported that at least one parent had a university degree by the time they were 18, whilst roughly two-thirds did not. This points to strong representation of social mobility in the sector, though it also suggests that the educational background of parents is not a changing factor in who reaches charity leadership.

Type of secondary school attended

YEAR	STATE SCHOOL	INDEPENDENT/FEE-PAYING	FEE-PAYING WITH BURSARY	SCHOOL OUTSIDE THE UK
2022	77%	15%	2%	3%
2023	79%	13%	4%	4%
2024	75%	16%	3%	4%

The majority of charity leaders were educated at state schools, with figures consistently around three-quarters across all three years. A smaller but stable proportion, around 13-16% attended independent or fee-paying schools, whilst 2-3% attended with bursaries. A further 2-4% were educated outside the UK. The pattern across the three years is consistent and this shows little change in the educational background of leaders.

Eligibility for free school meals

YEAR	ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	*NOT APPLICABLE	DON'T KNOW	PREFER NOT TO SAY
2022	14%	58%	22%	-	-
2023	18%	59%	17%	5%	1%
2024	18%	56%	20%	6%	1%

**Charity CEOs who either finished school before 1980 when free school meals ceased to be a statutory duty or went to school outside the UK.*

Eligibility for free school meals has risen modestly, from 14% in 2022 to 18% in 2023 and 2024. A clear majority (56-58%) were not eligible, reflecting barriers for those from less affluent backgrounds. A small but growing proportion have answered "don't know" or "prefer not to say". Overall, the results have been stable across the three years, with only slight variation.

Occupation of the main household earner

The 2022 and 2023 surveys looked at the occupation of the main household earner. The largest share of respondents came from households where the main earner worked in modern professional and traditional professional occupations i.e. teacher, social worker, musician, accountant, solicitor, medical practitioner, scientist. This rose from 33% in 2022 to 35% in 2023. Managers/administrators i.e. chief executive, finance manager, large business owner, retail manager, restaurant manager stayed steady at 22% in both years.

Technical/craft occupations i.e. motor mechanic, plumber, electrician, train driver fell from 14% in 2022 to 12% in 2023. This could point to fewer young people coming from skilled trade households. Routine/semi-routine/manual/service jobs i.e. cleaner, sales assistant, driver, postal worker rose from 10% in 2022 to 12% in 2023. This potentially demonstrates more people with working-class backgrounds.

Small business owners (<25 employees) i.e. corner shop owners, small plumbing companies, single restaurant or café owner, taxi owner fell from 10% in 2022 to 7% in 2023. This is the sharpest decline, possibly reflecting the continued financial pressures on small businesses.

Clerical/intermediate occupations i.e. secretary, personal assistant, nursery nurse remained stable at 5%. Long-term unemployed i.e. claimed Jobseeker's Allowance or earlier unemployment benefit for more than a year rose slightly from 3% in 2022 to 4% in 2023.

Reflections

The data suggests that charity leaders generally come from socially diverse backgrounds, with most not having parents who held university degrees and the majority attending state schools. Whilst a significant proportion were not eligible for free school meals, around one in five were. Household occupations further highlight mixed origins, with a small rise in professional and working-class backgrounds, stability in managerial and clerical roles and a decline in technical trades and small business households across the two years. The findings indicate that the charity sector demonstrates some level of social mobility compared to other leadership fields.

We encourage charity leaders to:

- Acknowledge and challenge subtle biases that can exist in hiring and promotion.
- Train boards and senior staff to be aware of class privilege, accents and assumptions about professionalism.
- Ensure entry-level salaries are genuinely liveable so people from low-income backgrounds are not excluded.
- Be transparent about pay scales and progression routes so that staff from all backgrounds can see a clear pathway into leadership.
- Actively build more open pathways for the next generation of diverse leaders and create programmes specifically aimed at people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and offer mentoring or sponsorship for staff who may not otherwise access formal leadership training.
- Encourage boards to consider socioeconomic background as part of their diversity strategy and recruit trustees from different walks of life, including lived experience of poverty or disadvantage.
- Speak publicly about social mobility, showing that leadership doesn't require a privileged start.
- Push funders to consider how grant-making processes may exclude organisations led by people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As **Duncan Exley wrote**, 'much of what makes an organisation more accessible and user-friendly for people from outside of the usual demographics also have the effect of making the organisation more smooth-running and therefore freeing up CEO time.'

The full reports from 2022, 2023, and 2024 offer detailed breakdowns by gender, race, disability, region, board satisfaction, and much more. Visit acevo.org.uk to purchase the latest Pay and Equalities Survey reports.