

Reading the river (feeling it in your waters)

We made it. Rain and shine, white water and calm, thrills and spills, low points and highs. Our four days in Scotland, watery miles of paddling together two in a boat on (and sometimes in) the River Spey, was a trip to remember.

From your own experience you may recall the sound of water bubbling over the rocks and the feel of the stream's cool splash on your face. You may be able to conjure up an image of the river, trees and wide sky. And if you are paddler you will know how important it is to 'read the river'. We had a map (durable and waterproof) which charted the bridges, towns and distilleries. These things were known.

But the map did not tell us where the river would boil, where the flow was too shallow to pass or where the stream was going to carry us into overhanging branches – these things we did our best to anticipate and they challenged us to use our (limited) skills to react to what nature threw at us.

As trustees, some things are mapped out before us (submitting accounts, board reappointments), but we also come upon many things which we had not seen coming our way and which then challenge us to raise our game and react with skill.

Time and the river will still be flowing after we're gone, but while we're here let's use all our senses to read the undercurrents in the life of our board. And act in good time. Some of these things may be the product of the internal dynamics of the board and the organisation. Such as knowing when it's time for the chair

to move on; when is the time to go to the membership to propose a change of constitution or name; when is the time to hold the trustee awayday to reflect and plan? And we know that it takes a long time to implement some things so we need to look far ahead – I gave a year's notice of my intention to stand down as chair of Timebanking UK.

Read the river wrong and you may find yourself frantically bailing out or, like some of my friends, out of your boat and up to your neck in cold water. Your organisation is in distress, trustees lose sleep and you do not serve your organisation in the way you aspire to.

Other things are not a product of internal dynamics, but from external factors over which we have no control. On the river, we could have paid better attention and read the dark cloud... but we didn't and we discovered it meant hail and lashing wind.

Did you see it coming? The downturn in demand for your services, the harsh funding climate, the policy shift which jarred you into doing a sharp right-hand turn? And what do you and your board know now somewhere deep down, but which no-one is speaking about, and which you're going to find out in a year's time when it pops up to the surface?

Take a look beneath the waves, feel it in your waters, now – before it's too late and you're heading for the governance rocks. ●

Martin Farrell
Chair, Timebanking UK
Director, get2thepoint,
martin.farrell@get2thepoint.org



"We need blue-sky thinking on what to do on a rainy day"