



Giving What We Can review July 2014-June 2015

Key metrics:

589 new members over this year, which took us to 1122. This compares to 237 we gained over the previous year.

Reserves: up to the end of 2015 plus around 12 months. This number includes some pledged donations which have not come in yet but which we are confident will come in.

Cost per member: ~£260. Our budget over the period was £151,000, and dividing this by the number of members gives £260. This compares to around £370 for the previous year.

Giving What We Can is the community of effective givers. We inspire people to donate significantly and as effectively as possible. Forming a community allows us to share information on how and where to give, help us stick to our commitment and stand together to change the culture around giving.

Over this past year, our community grew faster than ever before, from 533 members to 1122. We learned more about the amazing impact chapters can have (for example, the Cambridge pledge event which resulted in around 80 new members), and that this is most likely when those running the chapters really take ownership and put into practice ideas they are passionate about, which differ very much between chapters. We continue to believe that personal outreach which allows a person to get gradually involved is likely to be the most effective, but we have moved away from organising events ourselves as our main method of first engaging with people towards supporting chapters to do so, and using social media.

What we expected our Jul 2014 – Jun 2015 to look like at the beginning of it:

We planned for this year to be one of steady slow growth. We expected that our team would consist of Jon (Community), Steph (Communications) and me, and that we would hire a Director of Research towards the end of 2014 / beginning of 2015. We planned for Jon to focus on reaching out individually to people who had already shown some interest in Giving What We Can or effective altruism, while he kept chapters and membership administration ticking over. We planned that Steph, having done a major update of the website over the first half of 2014, would focus on running events in London, and trying to gradually build up a reputation for excellent regular events, somewhat in the

image of The Funding Network. Our plan was to work out the best strategy for producing events, and then using our chapters to scale that up.

Changes in the middle of the period:

In fact, rather than our membership growing steadily but slowly, we had a large surge in membership in December and January. 223 people joined in those two months alone (for comparison, that is nearly double the number who joined during the whole of 2013). This seemed to be due to a mixture of a chapter pledge event, giving season and smaller factors (for example, a blog post on SlateStarCodex). For that reason, we decided we needed someone dedicated to member retention, and to understanding our member base as well as possible. Also at the end of the year, Steph resigned. Therefore, rather than hiring just for a researcher, we hired for 3 positions. We restructured the team, taking on Alison Woodman to focus on members, Sam Deere for Communications, and Hauke Hillebrandt for Research.

While we had planned to spend this full year developing a reputation for running excellent events for professionals, attracting people to events in London while we're based in Oxford turned out to be tougher than we anticipated. At the same time, our chapters outstripped our expectations in terms of number and impact per chapter. What seemed to make them work well was the people running the chapter having great ideas, and getting excited to carry them out. Since organising events seemed to be less cost-effective than we expected, and chapters more so, we decided that rather than trying to get really good at running events ourselves and then reproducing that through chapters, we would mentor chapters to work on their own ideas, with Jon taking charge.

Reaching out individually to people who have shown an interest in effective giving was passed from being part of the Community role to part of the Communications role. We planned that continuing to measure the efficacy of this individual outreach, and developing the best strategies for it, would be Sam's main focus, which he would then hand over to a staff member who was planning to join us in the summer. We expected Sam to be with us for around 4 months. Since he was not interested in a long-term position (preferring to be with us around a year), we decided that another applicant would be a better choice for the full-time position, but wanted Sam to work with us in the interim.

How did our plan for this six months go?

We were pleased with the result of increasing our investment in chapters: 15 new chapters were set up in the last six months. In some cases, that has been through new members enthusiastic to set one up and in some cases through the chapter seeding method Jon has been trialling where he sets up a Facebook page for a chapter in a university, joins relevant Facebook groups for that university, and tries to find people interested in setting up the chapter. It is often a mixture – for example Jon's method finding a number of people who were considering setting up a chapter, and this speeding the process up. The breakdown is approximately - one third chapter seeding, one third some kind of email/prompt Jon sent, one third organic.

Jon has been in regular contact with most of our chapters. Jon has sent a survey to chapters asking how useful contact with him was over this period. The trend seems to be that the support was valuable for new chapters, but not for well-established ones. On the other hand, it is possible that there are particular actions Jon could take which would be useful in increasing the impact of chapters - for example, organising 6 monthly pledge events. This is the next thing he will be testing. For more information on how the chapter strategy has gone, see Jon's [6 month report](#).

We are continuing to try to improve our information on how many people join due to chapter activities. The membership form asks how people first heard about Giving What We Can. So far 19 people have said a chapter/society. It also asks if they are already part of a chapter. 87 people said yes to that. These questions were only put on the form around a year and a half ago, and we can be fairly sure that even for that period they are an underestimate because, for example, the Cambridge pledge event generated around 83 members. These kinds of questions are very vague - the Cambridge pledge event was not put on by the main Cambridge chapter, although there was some collaboration, it was a student group that worked on it, and the student group knew about GWWC because of the Cambridge chapter (so the chapter was a sine qua non of the event). When Skyping new members, Alison found that 29 out of the 115 she's talked to so far said they were part of a chapter. Jon has asked chapter presidents to give him an estimate of how many people have joined through their chapter, but they find it difficult to estimate.

Having someone focusing on member retention and understanding our member base has gone well so far, though it will take a while to assess the full value of this. Alison has been reaching out to all new members since last October and asking if they would like to Skype her. This is partially to make sure they feel properly part of the community, increase their enthusiasm and allow them to ask questions, and partially to learn more about what leads people to become members of GWWC, and what influences them along the way. She has written up a [report of her findings thus far](#). There are a number of interesting and actionable findings. For example: Several members gave as a reason for joining the fact that being part of a community gave their ideas more credibility when talking to others. This indicates we should think more about making potential members aware of this benefit, and continuing to make sure that we are in fact providing this benefit. Another interesting finding was the spread of lengths of time people had known about GWWC before joining. For example, 10% of those she asked had known about GWWC for between 5 and 6 years before they joined. This seems to support the idea that for many people, joining may be a gradual process, and that it is worth reaching out to people who seem interested even if they have known about us for a long time and not yet joined.

Alison has also taken over running the Giving What We Can Trust. The Trust has had a large increase in donations over the last 6 months. More than £700,000 has now moved through it, and it has had around 1000 donors, of whom only 200 are members of Giving What We Can. Due to this increase and the changeover from George, this has taken up a large part of her time. This should be far less so in the future because Sam has automated a large part of the bookkeeping for it, and several of the tasks had fairly large set up costs, such as working out how to claim gift aid. However, we expect it to be a larger time commitment than we had initially expected, because it is getting more use than we expected. We think the increased time commitment is worth it.

Hauke had been with us for around 4 months at the end of June. During that time, he has done extremely good work, writing [in depth reports](#) on the progress of each of our recommended

charities, as well as trying to get up to speed as much as possible with poverty alleviation interventions across the board. He has also been working to develop a long-term research strategy.

Our rough plan for Communications over this period was for Sam to work on building capacity for a new hire to focus on individual outreach from July onwards. We expected that to take the form of Sam improving our social media following, testing the responsiveness of a number of groups and improving the website. In fact, he worked on a software tool to make reaching out on Facebook more efficient, after which he focused on a number of projects including automating the Trust. These slowed down progress on the website, but seemed an even better use of his time. He has also worked on some wider outreach, such as media connected to Singer's book launch in the UK and setting up a regular blog on the [Huffington Post](#).

Sam's work has been extremely high quality. While he had expected only to want to be with the team for a year or so before going back to politics, he has enjoyed working here more than he expected. Therefore, we decided that if our fundraising went well we would (and did) offer him a long-term contract, expecting to take on both him and the person we expected would take over from him.

After his exams finished, the staff member we expected to take over from Sam decided he would prefer not to join the team. His initial reason was the restructuring of the team, and worries about overlap with Sam. I talked to him in detail about how to separate out the roles, his unique skills which had led us to offer him the position and how to make sure the two had distinct areas and that he was enthusiastic about his role. He also talked to a number of other members of the team. He ultimately concluded that he simply was not as interested in working with us as he had thought. This was a shame, but it was much better to find that out before he came. He gave us useful feedback on how to improve the recruiting process in the future.

Over this period, we aimed to do an impact evaluation of Giving What We Can, and run a fundraising campaign to raise our budget for the year. Our [impact review](#) showed that we seemed to have a leverage factor anywhere between 6:1 and 100s:1, with our expected leverage factor so far being 60:1 (that is, for every one pound donated to us, we move around 60 to our top charities which wouldn't otherwise have been donated).

We completed our fundraiser, raising a bit over our £150,000 goal. One aim we had for the fundraiser was to find new regular donors in order to diversify our donor base. A number of the new donors seem likely to be willing to be regular mid-range donors (~£2k p.a.), although relatively few regular donors of as much as £5k p.a.. The fundraising prospectus seemed to be well-received. The main suggestion for improvement we received was to focus more on our activities and what marginal funding would go towards, and less on historical impact. We hope that having done this in-depth impact evaluation it will be easier to do again with updated numbers, and so more of our time can go towards explaining our marginal activities. We set a fairly long fundraising period of 2 months. Many donors waited quite a long time to donate, partly because they wanted to know how likely we were to fill our funding gap. We had expected to be able to raise more if we fundraised for a longer period, but in fact it seems that it would have likely been better to fundraise for a shorter period, but perhaps advertise that we are going to do a fundraising push in advance. Next time we will have a fundraising period of no more than a month.

Some of the important things we learned over the past year:

- The importance and difficulty of keeping staff long-term. It is very hard to have smooth handovers and properly retain institutional knowledge in an area when staff change over. Therefore, we would like to keep the same staff for at least a few years, rather than less than two, which has been the case in the past. In order to do that, we made 'likelihood to stay long-term' a significant criteria in our recruitment process, we will try to ensure that all our staff are getting the professional development they would like, and make sure to stay in a stable financial position.
- The full potential of chapters, particularly when they work on something they are really excited about – we estimate that the Cambridge pledge event led to 83 new members.
- That the trust, particularly given the volume of money it is now moving, needs to be managed by someone really conscientious and who has it as a major part of their role – the move to Alison doing it has been excellent. The other two trustees of the Trust should also keep a closer eye on what it is doing than they had been.
- In research, our comparative advantage continues to be identifying crucial considerations, particularly those emerging from the academic literature – such as the link between schistosomiasis and HIV. Continuing to keep up with these kinds of developments will therefore be a significant focus for us.
- The usefulness of automating processes such as bookkeeping and some parts of outreach, and therefore the importance of having someone on staff with significant tech skills.
- We have continued to be very fortunate in the volunteers we attract, which has been useful for research and for blog writing – not just our own, but also now for the Huffington Post. That is likely in part because of our excellent blog manager and in part because we're in Oxford. Given the value this has brought, we should continue to try to be appealing for volunteers to work with.

Pledge change:

In the meeting a year ago we discussed altering the Giving What We Can pledge to make clear that it was about caring about all others, not just people in developing countries. The reason was that effective altruism seemed to be catching on as a broad concept more than we had expected. While we had expected that it would be difficult to get people on board with the idea of aiming to help others as much as possible rather than having more concrete, proximate goals in view, the overall idea of effective altruism has grown fairly well. An increasing number of people hearing about and adopting that idea makes it the more important that those people stand together, and also that the idea translates into action. Making joining GWWC a natural thing for everyone persuaded of effective altruism to do would seem to be a good way to ameliorate these worries.

We spent a couple of months doing a consultation with our members and others about changing the pledge. We got a good deal of engagement, with people making good points both in favour of and against the change. The main worries people seemed to have was a deterioration of the

community spirit, in particular that we might get members joining who didn't care about eradicating poverty, and that having a less specific pledge would make joining less appealing to newcomers. In general, the latter concern was allayed when we talked to people more about how we proposed to implement the change. In order to avoid the former worry, we planned not to make a bigger deal of the change than it warranted, and to talk regularly to incoming members and existing members to make sure the community feeling remained intact. We decided that the benefits therefore seemed to outweigh the costs, and changed the pledge in November. Those who had had concerns seemed to feel they had been taken into account, and therefore were for the most part behind the change. Over Nov-Jan we got around 15 new members who cited the pledge change as one of the things that had prompted them to join. Some of these are donating to poverty alleviation charities, but had felt that since it was a lifelong pledge they wanted there to be the possibility of donating to other causes if, decades from now, there was a more effective cause. Others of these donate to charities aiming to prevent animal suffering. The community feeling seems to be unchanged. The benefits of the change seem difficult to gauge so far. They will likely depend on the extent to which the Effective Altruism movement takes off and whether those affiliated with it do in fact end up joining and donating 10% to the most effective charities.