

Job Description: Chief Executive Officer

Document	Job Description
Role Title	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Organisation	School of Hard Knocks (SOHK)
Reports To	Chair of the Board of Trustees
Direct Reports	Director of Programmes; Head of Fundraising; Director of Finance & Operations
Status	Final
Date	September 2026

1. About School of Hard Knocks

School of Hard Knocks (SOHK) is one of the leading education charities in the UK, working in 29 secondary schools across England, Scotland, and Wales. Using rugby as a key delivery tool, we support young people who are struggling to engage in early secondary education, often because of anxiety, low confidence, disrupted home lives, or behavioural challenges rooted in trauma. For many of the children we support, life has already brought more hardship than most adults experience in a lifetime. These challenges shape how they show up in school: withdrawn, overwhelmed, angry, or simply unable to cope.

Our purpose is clear: to help young people facing complex challenges break the cycle and move towards a safer, stronger, more hopeful future.

We are proud to be delivering long-term programmes that meaningfully reach and impact hundreds of young people each year, but the societal need is vast. Our ambitious four-year strategic plan targets growth, seeing us bring our impactful programme to hundreds more young people each year.

The SOHK Schools Programme is a two-year intervention working with cohorts of around 20 pupils from Year 7 through to Year 9. Pupils are selected by the school and are typically among the hardest to reach young people. Each week, we deliver half a day of rugby training and classroom sessions built around our 3Cs framework, covering topics such as growth mindset, goal setting, and decision-making, alongside monthly one-to-one sessions with every pupil. The programme's impact is evaluated by SOHK staff, teachers, parents, and the pupils themselves.

Ninety percent of our participants report feeling more confident and more engaged with school after taking part, with long-term effects on attendance, attainment, and life outcomes.

Find out more about our [Schools Programme](#).

Since 2023, SOHK has been proud to partner with Impetus, a charity that invests in and supports organisations helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed. This partnership combines investment with strategic and organisational development support, helping to strengthen our impact and set SOHK up for sustainable growth.

“Despite the usual challenges that every education or sport for development charity faces, School of Hard Knocks really is unique. It is not so much what we deliver at a programme level (which is of course brilliant) but who we are as a team. The shared passion is never less than deeply moving to me and the sheer vitality and fun, combined to the highest degree with professionalism and talent, never ceases to amaze. If you are a values-led leader and love the idea of ‘team’, then School of Hard Knocks is the place for you.”

— Ken Cowen, Founder and outgoing CEO

2. Role Purpose

The CEO is the public face and leader of SOHK. They are responsible for the overall strategic direction, vision, and management of the charity, ensuring SOHK meets its mission and strategic objectives while maintaining strong relationships with the Trustees of Trustees, staff, supporters, and the wider SOHK community. The CEO will be a mission-driven educational charity leader and effective fundraiser, capable of building a sustainable growth model.

The CEO is responsible for:

- Setting and executing the organisation's vision, strategy, and culture.
- Oversight of the charity's programmes, operations, governance, and systems.
- Ensuring long-term financial sustainability through fundraising and partnerships.
- Delivering measurable educational impact for young people.

3. Key Responsibilities

3.1 Strategy and Direction

- Be the face and voice of the charity — its principal ambassador.
- Lead the development and periodic review of SOHK's strategy with the Trustees and Senior Management Team, and advise the Trustees on strategic priorities, risks, and opportunities.
- Translate the 2026–30 strategy into organisational priorities, plans, and goals, setting clear strategic direction for the Senior Management Team and wider staff.
- Identify and assess strategic risks, issues, and opportunities, taking responsibility for initiating and leading associated change and course corrections.
- **Ensure** that safeguarding, wellbeing and the lived experience of young people remain central to organisational decision-making and growth plans.
- Seek out and implement opportunities for innovation, ensuring SOHK remains at the forefront of positive change in the sport-for-development and education charity sectors.
- Lead by example, instilling a culture of professionalism and inclusion.

3.2 Programme Delivery, Quality and Impact

- Hold a high bar for programme quality and outcomes for young people
- Ensure programmes are delivered consistently and with fidelity, reaching the young people SOHK exists to serve.
- Line-manage and support the Director of Programmes, working closely with them, the delivery teams, and key partners to build a world-class, evidence-based intervention.
- Ensure SOHK understands and can evidence the impact of its programmes, for itself and for external partners, and that data collection and analysis is of exceptionally high quality, with insights feeding directly back to delivery teams for constant improvement.

- Manage organisational performance against agreed goals and report progress to the Trustees.
- Drive continuous improvement across the organisation
- Be ultimately responsible for ensuring safeguarding, child protection, and data protection policies are embedded and followed, with staff regularly trained and supported.

3.3 Income Generation, Fundraising and External Relations

- Lead income generation across all funding sources — trusts and foundations, corporate partnerships, individual giving, and challenges and events.
- Line-manage and support the Head of Fundraising, working closely to refine and execute a comprehensive fundraising strategy, and provide hands-on support for key fundraising activity.
- Have ultimate oversight of all processes to identify, develop, and steward supporters, donors, grant-makers, and partners.
- Secure SOHK's financial sustainability and resilience, taking an active part in developing and maintaining effective working relationships with key stakeholders, organisations, and major donors.
- Hold senior relationships with funders and other external partners, and represent SOHK externally, building its brand, reputation, and profile in line with strategic priorities.

3.4 Leading People, Culture and Operations

- Build and lead a high-performing Senior Management Team, setting objectives, expectations, and priorities, and giving developmental feedback.
- Lead, support, and motivate all staff, growing their loyalty and commitment to the charity's aims, objectives, and ambitions, and foster a positive, inclusive, high-performing culture aligned with SOHK's values.
- Support the development, wellbeing, and retention of staff, ensuring SOHK is a place where people want to work and are supported to do their best; work with HR and managers to develop best practice for the management, development, and engagement of staff and volunteers.
- Line-manage and support the Director of Finance & Operations, ensuring operational excellence across finance, risk, compliance, policies, and administration.
- Work closely with the Director of Finance & Operations on budgeting, financial planning, and cash-flow management, ensuring sustainability and value for money.
- Provide all necessary support to the operations team to ensure effective use of technology and data to support delivery and decision-making.

3.5 Governance, Risk and the Trustees

- Act as the primary link between the organisation and the Trustees, working with the Chair to support its effective operation, and liaise with the Trustees to ensure SOHK's overall governance structure, policies, and procedures are appropriate and effective, taking remedial measures as necessary.
- Provide Trustees with timely, accurate, and relevant information; attend all Trustees meetings (held four times a year) and prepare a written report in advance of each meeting detailing matters of interest and concern, ensuring the Trustees is made aware in good time of any matters requiring its attention. Build strong and constructive relationships with Trustees, leveraging their expertise, networks and support.
- Ensure compliance with all legal, regulatory, and Charity Commission requirements.
- Oversee the development and practical application of all organisational policies and procedures, including health and safety, equality and diversity, and safeguarding.

- Ensure that all major risks are identified and regularly reviewed, and that systems and procedures are in place to mitigate them.

3.6 Safeguarding

- Champion a culture where safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.
- Ensure robust safeguarding systems, policies and training are in place.
- Provide assurance to trustees regarding safeguarding effectiveness and incidents.
- Ensure young people's welfare remains paramount as the organisation grows.

3.7 Additional Responsibilities

- Carry out any other tasks consistent with the general remit of the post.

4. Key Interfaces

Interface	Purpose
Board of Trustees / Chair	Governance oversight and strategic sign-off; quarterly Trustees reporting and advance written updates; escalation of matters requiring Trustees attention.
Director of Programmes	Programme design, delivery quality, evidence and impact data, and safeguarding practice.
Head of Fundraising	Income generation strategy, donor and funder stewardship, and long-term financial sustainability.?
Director of Finance & Operations	Budgeting, financial planning, cash-flow management, risk, compliance, and operational systems.
Senior Management Team	Day-to-day organisational leadership, culture, staff development, and delivery of the strategic plan.
Schools, Delivery Partners and Funders	Programme delivery relationships, sector positioning, brand, and external reputation.

5. Candidate / Person Specification

Essential Experience

- Proven senior leadership experience in the charity, education, youth, or social impact sector — whether as CEO or as part of an executive team - including working directly with the Board of Trustees or equivalent governing body.
- Demonstrated success in building or significantly growing an organisation, programme, or initiative.
- A collaborative and values-led leadership style, with the ability to inspire trust, hold people to account, and build high-performing teams
- Strong track record of income generation and business development, including securing significant funding from trusts, foundations, corporates, or major donors.

- Experience of financial oversight, budgeting, and organisational planning, including holding significant budgetary responsibility at a senior level.
- Track record of shaping and delivering organisation-wide strategy.
- Experience of growing and managing diverse functions and teams, including specialist colleagues.
- Proven commitment to continuous improvement and to holding a high bar on quality.
- Ability to build senior relationships, internally and with external partners and funders.

Essential Skills & Competencies

- Solid understanding of SOHK's mission and objectives, particularly in the context of sport and education.
- Strategic thinker with the ability to translate vision into clear plans and delivery.
- Strong relationship-builder and communicator, confident with a wide range of stakeholders.
- Entrepreneurial mindset: comfortable with ambiguity, problem-solving, and innovation.
- Strong organisational, project management, and prioritisation skills.
- High standards of integrity, judgement, and professionalism.
- Commitment to safeguarding, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Desirable

- Previous charity CEO experience - a bonus, but not essential; we know that brilliant candidates may come from a wide range of backgrounds. Leadership experience within the charity sector, ideally in education or youth.
- Evidenced commitment to improving outcomes for young people facing barriers to success in education and in life.
- Direct classroom, youth work, or education leadership experience, and experience of co-production with young people.
- Experience of fundraising across SOHK's core income streams (trusts and foundations, corporate partnerships, individual giving, and challenges and events).
- Knowledge of the UK education system and youth policy landscape.
- Experience in brand-building, communications, and/or digital engagement.
- Direct experience of SOHK's mission and the young people it works with, whether professional or lived.
- Experience of scaling a multi-site delivery organisation and working with local authorities

Personal Attributes

- Deep commitment to improving outcomes for young people, especially those facing disadvantage.
- Resilient and persistent, with the ability to work under pressure and navigate setbacks.
- Collaborative, open, and reflective leader who seeks feedback and learns from it.
- Inspires trust and motivates others toward a shared mission.

6. Terms of Appointment

Contract Type	Full-time, permanent
Location	Greater London with offices in Edinburgh and Cardiff
Salary	£85,000 – £90,000 per year + £5,000 PRP
Travel	Regular UK travel, primarily to Edinburgh and Cardiff. Occasionally evenings for stakeholder engagement and capital raising functions expected.
Reports To	Chair of Trustees
Trustees Meetings	Quarterly (four times per year). Ad hoc Sub- committees

This job description reflects the current requirements of the role and may be reviewed and amended as SOHK's needs evolve.