



GOVERNWELL

A ONE STOP TRAINING RESOURCE FOR NHS GOVERNORS

EFFECTIVE
PARTICIPATION
IN COUNCIL OF
GOVERNOR
MEETINGS

INTRODUCTION

Having a committed and engaged council of governors (CoG) ensures that patients, staff and the public have a say in shaping their local health service. Achieving this requires good working relationships which are created through regular dialogue in both formal and informal meetings.

Through our observations of CoG meetings it is clear that there are some guiding principles which can help secure the best outcomes. This guidance document is aimed at governors and highlights some of these principles which may help you in participating effectively in your CoG meetings.

CoG MEETINGS

CoG meetings are a key forum for enabling governors to fulfil their duties as outlined in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. These meetings are held in public and how they run can be vital to the overall success or failure of the governing body as a whole.

Key points

- **On average, CoGs meet three to four times a year**
- **Total CoG sizes can range from 15 to 48, with the average size being 29** (from [NHS Providers CoG benchmarking March 2015](#))
- **Trust secretaries or membership managers usually organise the venue and distribute the agenda and relevant papers ahead of the meeting as stated in the standing orders**
- **CoG meetings often have a lot of items to cover, so it is important that participants are well-prepared and prioritise the key issues**

Here are some tips on how to make an early and useful contribution in CoG meetings:

1 Be open

Having an environment where open but respectful dialogue can take place will help participants feel comfortable in asking difficult questions and challenging when it is appropriate.

2 Prepare

Read all the papers for the meeting beforehand and be prepared to ask questions on the topics covered. Attending a pre-meeting with other governors can be helpful in enabling governors to form a view on the key areas to question.

3 Clarify

Ask the trust secretary or chair to explain anything you are unclear about in advance of the meeting. Don't be afraid to do this – no-one can expect you to understand everything from the start.

4 Simplify

We all use jargon, abbreviations and acronyms and sometimes forget that others don't understand it as easily as we do. Don't be afraid to ask a speaker to explain jargon which comes up in the meeting, or even better get it clarified with your trust secretary/membership manager in advance.

5 Get involved

If volunteers are sought, put yourself forward for a project you are confident in tackling successfully provided you can commit the time required.

Typically, members of the board or senior managers will present performance updates at CoG meetings. In such sessions it is usually the presenter's aim to inform governors about the trust's progress against its high level plans. It is the governors' role to gain assurance about the performance of the board by asking key questions, however, it is important to ask them at the end when questions are invited rather than interrupting during presentations unless the speaker specifies otherwise.

Questions in advance of your CoG meeting

Before attending your CoG meeting, you might find asking the following questions of another governor or your trust secretary helpful:

- How will the room be set up?
- How many people will be in the room?
- What is the format of the meeting?
- When will the papers be available?
- Are there any pre-meetings?
- What do I do if I want to ask a question?
- What do I do if the debate is curtailed and I still have a question I want to ask?

Experience will usually help to make the meetings less daunting. Nerves are not unusual, especially for newly appointed governors who may not be used to attending formal meetings. The most common and successful ways to conquer meeting nerves include:

- observing a similar meeting in advance to familiarise yourself with proceedings
- preparing by reading the papers in advance and thinking about questions you can ask
- focusing on the value you can add for patients and service users.

MEETING ETIQUETTE

Key points

- **It is important to develop good working relationships with your colleagues as this will make meetings more effective**
- **Listening, respecting your colleagues' right to express their views and making your points constructively are the cornerstones of good meeting etiquette**

It is worth bearing in mind that CoG meetings must take a wide perspective on trust performance, so if a governor has an individual issue it may be more appropriate to address this outside of the formal meeting proceedings.

It is also worth remembering the quality of your first few contributions will create an impression in the minds of trust staff and peers of who you are and your role in the group. Beware of creating an image of yourself that is untrue to your values and those of the NHS which limits the way you operate in the future.

It is the chair's role to deal with disruptions and follow up any relationship and conflict issues outside of meetings, however, as a member of the CoG you should support the chair in this.

The checklist below includes activities governors could go through at the start of a meeting. They provide a clear summary of what everyone should expect to be able to do, and how they can expect to be treated.

Ask yourself *'Have I...'*

- read and understood the minutes and papers?
- made notes on what I want to say and what I am looking for in response from the trust?
- formed a view in advance with my peers (especially on complex issues)?
- got written responses to anything I've been asked to address?
- arranged to be there for the whole meeting?
- sent apologies if I am unable to attend?
- notified the trust secretary in advance of any special requirements?
- raised an important issue not on the agenda?

Tell yourself *'I will...'*

- have a positive attitude
- actively participate in discussions
- check my phone is switched off
- really listen to what people say
- compliment the work of at least one colleague that has performed well
- make at least one well prepared contribution
- ask questions when invited rather than interrupt
- remember my role is to support the board as well as hold them to account.

QUALITY OF PAPERS

It is important that papers are written and distributed in an accessible way in advance of meetings, with summaries provided for lengthy documents. Simply attaching lengthy documents in an email without a summary can lead to fragmented discussions. Each agenda item should be suitably précised to ensure that governors are clear as to the context and purpose of the paper, the key issues/risks arising from the content and what is expected from the board in terms of decisions, noting, approval etc.

Other elements of good practice include clearly assigning action responsibilities and deadlines, and reporting the results of these actions at the next meeting. To ensure readability, the use of graphs, infographics, tables and bullet points can be helpful. If required, easy read versions of papers with a large typeface and more pictorial representations can be provided to assist governors with learning disabilities or visual impairments.

SUMMARY

To effectively participate in CoG meetings governors should:

- be prepared by reading all the papers in advance and ensuring you understand them
- ask pertinent questions in order to gain assurance and hold non-executive directors to account
- reflect on meetings with your peers after and prior to meetings to ensure that you have formed a consensus view about the issues discussed
- follow meeting etiquette and aim to develop productive communication with other participants in the meeting
- reflect on your own performance after the meeting.



NHS Providers is the membership organisation and trade association for the NHS acute, ambulance, community and mental health services that treat patients and service users in the NHS. We help those NHS foundation trusts and trusts to deliver high quality, patient focused care by enabling them to learn from each other, acting as their public voice and helping shape the system in which they operate.

NHS Providers has 95 per cent of all NHS foundation trusts and aspirant trusts in membership, collectively accounting for £65 billion of annual expenditure and employing more than 928,000 staff.

EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN COUNCIL OF GOVERNOR MEETINGS



One Birdcage Walk, London SW1H 9JJ
020 7304 6977
enquiries@nhsproviders.org
www.nhsproviders.org
@NHSProviders

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NHS Providers is the operating name of the Foundation Trust Network
Registered charity 1140900
Registered in England & Wales as company 7525114
Registered Office
One Birdcage Walk, London SW1H 9JJ

April
2016