

Council of Governors Effectiveness Surveys

In corporate governance it is good practice to review all formal committees on a frequent and specified basis to assess their effectiveness and answer the fundamental question are they doing what they were set up to do? The FT Code of Governance states that 'The council of governors should assess its own collective performance and its impact on the NHS foundation trust.' Many trusts do this for their Council of Governors (CoG) but not always in a regular, transparent or systematic way.

Over the last year we have introduced effectiveness surveys for CoGs backed up with a workshop for all governors. We have the benefit of a strong Analysis team at NHS Providers supporting our policy work for members who have advised on the structure and language of the survey. It has a core bank of questions across six sections with some trusts requesting additional questions to tease out particular local issues. It is sent via an electronic link to all governors to complete on an anonymous basis across a two week period and we aim for a minimum response rate of two thirds of the CoG members.

In addition to responses to specified questions governors are invited to submit freetext comments on each section which can be illuminating both in explaining high/low scores and in how governors are feeling about their role.

We share the findings of the survey and plan the workshop via a call with trust representatives which usually comprises a combination of the chair, company secretary, lead governor and officer who acts as first point of contact for the CoG. We are briefed on any current or sensitive issues and also look at papers from the latest CoG meeting and if one is scheduled ahead of the workshop we try to attend the meeting.

We encourage trusts to share the survey report in full with governors ahead of the workshop, which is scheduled for one and a half to two hours. Target audience for the workshop is all governors but some trusts have chosen to invite NEDs too. Here we present a high level summary of the findings, check whether this is in line with governor expectations and seek to build a consensus on the areas for development. The ideal outcome is a clear set of actions designed to strengthen the effectiveness of the CoG. Some workshops have been followed up by a series of training and development sessions on specific themes either led by us or run internally by the trust. Examples are holding to account,

developing the lead governor role, organisation and conduct of meetings and representing members and the public.

When we first offered the workshops last year we went to the trust premises and delivered them face to face. Since the onset of Covid-19 we have just delivered our second workshop using virtual technology, in both cases using the trusts preferred platform. As the workshop lasts a maximum of two hours with the survey report and questions to consider circulated in advance these have worked well on a virtual basis. Some of the platforms feature “breakout rooms” which we have used to enable small group working.

A clear benefit of this process, which we can evidence from verbal and written feedback, is that governors really appreciate that the trust is taking them seriously, investing in their development and seeking to improve the relationship between the council and the board.

As we have gradually increased the size of our database from the surveys we are able to provide more comparative analysis to assess the relative strengths and areas for development of each CoG. Experience to date suggests some trusts come to us as they see value in an independent source undertaking the survey but all recognise our expertise in delivering governor training and development via the GovernWell programme since 2013.

We always seek user feedback and Susan Simpson, Director of Corporate Governance and Company Secretary at Kingston Hospital NHS FT, stated –

“We engaged NHS Providers to lead an interactive workshop session to help bring clarity regarding the role of the Council of Governors and to prepare for any future work on governance we may do. Mark Price and Kim Hutchings led an interactive workshop session for our governors based on information gathered anonymously in a survey prior to the session. Mark and Kim were approachable, knowledgeable, thoughtful and thorough from beginning to end. The use of the survey ensured all voices could be heard in the discussion and we had some excellent feedback from governors about the event. It was also great to get some clear tangible actions for implementation afterwards. I was totally satisfied with the whole experience.”

Mark Price, member development manager mark.price@nhsproviders.org