Effective Virtual Meetings

With the current ongoing pandemic, many of the physical meetings and events which had been scheduled have come to a halt. However, many trusts have been quick to adapt and utilise technology to host virtual meetings and events.

By basic definition, a virtual meeting is an online event that involves people interacting in a virtual environment rather than a physical location. In this article we reflect on the pros and cons of working online and provide some top tips to lay the foundation for successful virtual meetings.

The governor support team is very interested to hear how governors have been exercising their statutory duties whilst working virtually. We invite you to get in touch via governors@nhsproviders.org so that we can collect as many examples as we can to share across the national network.

Pros of working online

- **Safety** – we do not know for how long we will need to have COVID-19 provision in trusts; therefore, governors are safer staying off the premises for the foreseeable future
- **Cost-effective** – a meeting or event comes with a wide range of costs and expenses such as venue costs, catering. With online meetings there are no fuel or public transport costs, no parking costs. The only costs a trust must consider is finding a suitable digital platform that is able to host all the attendees and to ensure good network communications
- **Parking problems** – many trusts do not have enough parking, and this removes the need to hunt out a parking space
- **Time saving** – some trusts cover a great many miles and not all governors live on the doorstep. There is time saved on driving to and from meetings
- **Increased level of participation** – physical venues tend to pose a limit as to the number of people they can accommodate. Virtual meetings enable trusts to scale and host even more people for less cost
- **Accessible (for some)** – depending on the platform only a good Internet connection is required. Platforms can be run on several different devices e.g. phone, iPad, laptop etc.
- **Time efficient** – many technologies have useful additional features like screen-sharing and breakouts

- **Inclusive** – most of the software in use for video meetings has a mechanism to raise an electronic hand if you want to contribute to the meeting. The Chair of the meeting can take 'hands' in turn and not miss any governors' desire to participate
- **New ways of working** – some foundation trusts have implemented new ways of working e.g. offering IT lessons and use of technical equipment to governors without prior use/knowledge of these facilities
- **Increased transparency** – some trusts have shared that they stream meetings virtually or put updates on trust websites
- **Increased involvement** – some governors have been able to access meetings they would not normally e.g. board meetings
- **Informal gatherings** – Some trusts have introduced less formal virtual meets such as "coffee morning " drop in chats on Zoom/Teams with governors and non-executive directors (NEDs)
- **Getting questions answered** – some trusts enable governors to send in pre-prepared questions for meetings they cannot attend. These are minuted or answered in a post-meeting note
- **New governors** – some trusts have organised an induction day on Zoom for newly elected governors and others buddy them with a more experienced peer.

Cons of working online

- **No face-face networking** – networking is one of the key aspects of meetings, but virtual meetings pose a limitation, as attendees do not really get an opportunity to have one on one discussions with each other. There are creative tools that can be used online e.g. breakout rooms, interactive whiteboards to help achieve this
- **Loss of informal engagement** – there is a need to keep online meetings concise and you can lose the opportunity to just share and mull things over. Evolving informal discussions before/after meetings or over refreshment breaks particularly
- **Need good technology, Broadband and Internet coverage** – poor connection or equipment malfunctions hinder involvement and meeting productivity
- **Distractions** – attending meetings from the comfort of one's home can also expose people to a lot of distractions e.g. doorbells, pets etc.
- **Environment** – online tools such as Zoom/MS Teams can be bland by design and lose the essence of the trust that is captured in physical space through pictures along corridors, being out in the community etc. That said, creative solutions like video, patient stories may be a good replacement to bring the trust to life again
- **Less time** – content and virtual meetings in general need to be shorter. This potentially runs the risk of agendas being stripped back and less time for questions

- **Less time on the trust premises** – some governors have expressed that they miss the service visits and opportunities for staff/patient/service user feedback that help them to triangulate the data they get from their board
- **Increased screen time** – looking at a computer screen for a long period of time can be tiring so frequent breaks are necessary
- **Less fluid interaction** – the ability to interact fluently in presentations which involve many slides and to intervene with the presenter when time is limited
- **Integration** – new governors may find integrating into a virtual 'team' more difficult as there is less time for informal meet and greets.

Top ten tips for effective virtual meetings

1. Be organised and let people know well in advance what you plan to do. Structure your meeting so everyone is clear on what is happening when. Send out the agenda and any key documents in good time beforehand. Participants need to come prepared and are clear on expectations
2. Use a high-quality digital tool that works for your trust. Participants should test all technology (including camera/video, Wi-Fi, and screen sharing) before the meeting
3. Keep meetings short so everyone makes optimum use of time. Ideally no more than 2 hours at one time
4. Set clear objectives for your meeting so participants focus on what is important
5. Virtual meetings should be a place of mutual respect and collaboration for all
6. Avoid distractions e.g., turn off your mobile phone, avoid checking emails etc.
7. To humanise your interactions, ask people to put their video on
8. The person coordinating the meeting should acknowledge everyone who is present at the outset, so they feel included
9. All participants should have the opportunity to offer their input
10. Take time at the end of a meeting to agree next steps.