

Setting up a voluntary buddying scheme

Working together is one of the fundamental values of the NHS and, for the future transformation of healthcare, collaboration is absolutely the direction of travel. On that note, having a “buddy” can make a huge difference in terms of building relationships amongst staff and the speed at which new recruits settle into their roles. Just knowing that there is someone there to listen and who is genuinely interested in helping can make people feel supported.

At Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (DBTH) a buddying scheme commenced in 2019. Entailing an individual governor being partnered up with a Non-Executive Director (NED), this came at just the right moment - with the first COVID-19 lockdown - and governors have not needed to return to the hospital sites since.

The creative idea originated from the Chair and it is delivered by a NED who is the Chair of the People Committee and the Trust Board office team. It gives governors the opportunity to get to know their buddy NED better than they otherwise would, especially with all the current restrictions on travel and in-person meetings. As a buddy, you are not line-managing anyone but are instead there as a supportive colleague and a friendly face. All legal power remains in the Council of Governors as a collective.

The personal attributes of a good buddy include:

- The ability to listen
- Openness and commitment
- Good time management skills
- Relevant knowledge and experience
- An honest and considerate approach
- Strong communication and an encouraging attitude
- A willingness to learn

Buddying allows governors to better understand the role of a NED (e.g. How are they appointed? What skills do they need? Do they get paid? Are they staff?).

It is an informal and voluntary scheme. The Trust knows the various areas of interest for its governors and so can pair them with the most relevant NED, by looking at which committees they chair. These committees include: People; Audit and Risk; Finance and Performance; Charity; Quality and Effectiveness. There is also some consideration of a person’s communication style when matching buddies.

DBTH offers this as a choice for governors and the majority do take it up. The frequency of buddy activities is purely down to the individual governors and NEDS to agree, with some meeting regularly and others meeting on a quarterly basis.

Sessions are currently held online or over the phone. The introductory meeting is tailored to individual governors, commencing with any questions they may have and any areas of interest that they would like to explore. There is a tendency to follow the interests of the governors in these meetings. For example, partner governors may have a keen interest in a particular area such as equality and diversity or research.

The scheme will continue to be monitored so that the Trust can further improve. On reflection, it has been great for new governors to ask all their questions and get up to speed with the issues they should be focusing on, as this prevents them from raising detailed operational matters later on, when their role is meant to be more strategic. The scheme also strengthens the governors' understanding of NED roles and builds up those relationships in an informal way. This has been especially useful in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Below are some quotes from governors, NEDs and the Trust Chair. They reveal the types of issues covered with buddies and the overall usefulness of the scheme thus far.

From the Chair's perspective:

"I am very grateful to my non-executive directors for adding this arrangement to their already busy schedules. It has helped NEDs and Governors to work better together, for each to do their very different jobs but enable Governors to keep a watching brief on performance and hold the non-executives to account for the performance of the board. Our CoG meetings are now more strategic and focusing on the big picture. I would certainly recommend it to other Foundation Trusts."

SUZY BRAIN ENGLAND OBE

From governors:

"Topics discussed include recent governor training; governor representation on sub-committees; how public governor concerns can sometimes differ from staff's; and action planning for improving culture of a hospital department."

"Engaging with third sector organisations, communication with the general public, perceptions in development of Trust and services offered. Suggested improvement to services."

"As a new governor support and clarification of role."

"We have discussed issues relating to areas that I didn't understand or where I had gaps in my knowledge about the Trust"

"It has been useful to broaden my understanding of processes in the Trust and how roles and departments relate to each other, as it's a complex organisation. I would recommend it as part of a governor's induction, especially if they are new to an NHS Foundation Trust."

From NEDs:

"As a NED, it has helped me to understand more about the perspectives and experiences of governors in a less formal setting"

"The scheme has improved relationships and communication"