

PUBLIC BOARD MEETINGS THAT ENCOURAGE PUBLIC ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT¹

Holding board meetings in public is one way that NHS organisations ensure accountability and demonstrate transparency. All too often, however, public board meetings fail to attract significant attendance and can feel impenetrable to those members of the public who do come. This case study describes the efforts of this mental health foundation trust to ensure that board meetings held in public are made meaningful and engaging for the public who are actively encouraged to make the effort to attend.

Norfolk and Waveney Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust

The Trust was established in 1994 and is dedicated to the care and recovery of anyone experiencing mental ill health or substance misuse. Over 2000 staff care for our service users, primarily in their own homes.

As a board we have always been committed to open board meetings, and have held some challenging and controversial debates in public. As we moved towards becoming a Foundation Trust we increasingly found that we needed to discuss subjects in camera, particularly as more of what we debated became “commercial”. We learned that this changed the nature and style of our debate, making us more challenging towards one another and facilitating our equal desire to become a corporate board.

How then to retain this helpful style, transact business effectively and appropriately, and still be open?

We decided to hold four meetings a year in public. These are spread across our extensive geographical patch and advertised to the public and members. We specifically encourage governors to attend. We hold them at the half way point between board of governor meetings.

Some agenda items are “business as usual”, but we try and make the meetings lively and accessible, and have used them for example to debate what should appear on our business performance report. Governors and the public are present and have the

¹ Case Study Provided by Chair

opportunity to contribute. Agendas have included governors reporting back on the annual plan, and we routinely receive the integrated governance report in this public meeting.

In our private board of director meetings we have a standing item on the agenda of matters to be reported back to governors. The chair adds these to her monthly report to governors and governors are invited to question the chairs' report and request further information on any item they want to know more about.

Timing is not always neat and tidy. Some subjects are sufficiently important to hold as separate agenda items for joint board of governor and board of director meetings. For example the boards of both directors and governors had a presentation and debate about the 'financial downside plan' before it was submitted to Monitor.

The public meetings and standing agenda item maintain the focus of directors on the need to keep governors informed. The meetings are well attended particularly by public governors, who are allowed to speak. governors plan to hold 'Meet your Governor' events for members following these meetings.

Public board meetings are only part of the story of being accountable and transparent. Governors are each linked with a board director who they can contact or meet with at any time. Sub Groups of governors are involved in more detailed work on things such as the annual plan, and a recent invitation to all members to public meetings on developing quality accounts went out in the name of one of the governors.