

COVID-19

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Short, effective board papers

In previous GGI briefings, we have addressed how the coronavirus crisis has placed extra pressure on NHS boards. And yet, just when they are asked to up their game, boards are being forced to conduct many of their meetings online, with all of the procedural challenges that entails.

Conversation flows less naturally in virtual meetings and focus is more easily lost. This puts extra pressure on those responsible for producing papers for board consideration. Good, clear briefing material on the matters to be decided is essential – as is a high level of commitment by board members to read that material before the meeting.

In today's bulletin we highlight some of the problems associated with writing briefing papers and offer some guiding principles that may help address those problems.

The importance of board papers

Directors have a duty to keep themselves informed about the matters put before them for decision. It's not possible to comply with this duty unless they have relevant briefing material upon which to base decisions. Board papers are a key source of information for board members and then form the official record and audit trail alongside the minutes.

In coming to a decision, a director must act in the way he considers, in good faith, would be most likely to promote the success of the trust including its patients, the wider public and staff having regard (among other matters) to:

- the likely consequences of any decision in the long term
- the interests of staff
- the need to foster business relationships with suppliers, stakeholders and others
- the impact of trust's operations on the community and the environment
- the desirability of maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct
- the need to act fairly

Some common problems directors face when they review board papers – and which board paper writers should try to avoid – include that the papers:

- are written for management, not the board
- assume the board members all share the writer's in-depth knowledge
- are poorly written
- are badly structured
- are poorly presented
- are too detailed
- focus on the benefits and gloss over the risks

“Good, clear briefing material on the matters to be decided is essential”

Writing for the board, especially non-executive directors, is not the same as writing a report for other managers.

Guiding principles

If time and effort is devoted to preparing any paper or report for the board, then it should have a real purpose. A paper may be the principal means by which the board fulfils its oversight responsibilities and makes decisions affecting the trust's future direction. Writers should consider these questions:

- What do we want to achieve by writing this paper?
- What do we want the board to do in response?
- What do directors need from my paper?

The challenge for board paper writers is not to provide more data or information – a temptation with electronic board packs – but to create better informed directors. So the writer's focus should be on quality, not quantity. Importantly, writers should be clear which of three types of board papers they are writing:

- papers for decision
- papers for discussion
- papers for assurance

Board papers must clearly present all key information and facts and indicate any actions required. Board papers that don't include all the necessary information in a form which is easy to read and understand can result in poor decision making.

Here are some further thoughts to keep in mind.

- Keep the length of papers down so they can be easily read and assimilated. Three pages is about right.
- Keep the style clear and consistent. Use house style (corporate branding, template and size of font, preferred layout), include lists and bullet points, write in plain English, explain unfamiliar terms or technical language and decode any acronyms.
- Start with a statement of what is being asked of the directors, together with a description of who else has considered the paper and a short executive summary so the directors can grasp the key issues before studying them in greater detail.
- The level of detail should be determined by the information the director needs to make an informed decision. Exclude unnecessary detail.
- Include technical information or statistics in an appendix, with key points drawn out in the paper.
- Include relevant key metrics and information. The board should discuss and agree what information it expects when considering major capital investments and subsequent revenue implications, acquisitions and disposals, introducing or withdrawing services, entering into a joint venture, partnership or collaboration etc.

- Include an analysis of the risks of the proposal, especially on quality and patient safety, financials, staff and reputation, but also the environment etc.
- Consider the risks of not taking the action recommended in the paper.
- Give details of any internal sign-offs, approvals, discussions, external advice, views of key stakeholders which have informed the drafting of the paper and the recommendation.
- Give a clear and reasoned recommendation.
- Detail any further approvals required and likely timing – e.g. approval of a regulator, joint venture partner or other related organisation.
- Provide the name of the writer and contact details.

Plain English rules

Using an appropriate level and style of language is a feature of effective business writing. Plain English is the best style for board papers. This is not 'dumbing down' but is about being clear and unambiguous.

- Stop, think and plan before you start to write.
- Make a note of the points you want to make in a logical order.
- Keep your sentences short – an average of 15 to 20 words. Try to stick to one main idea in a sentence.
- Choose active verbs – *we will do it* rather than *it will be done*.
- Use everyday English whenever possible, choosing shorter, familiar words.
- Avoid jargon and legalistic words and always explain any technical terms you have to use.
- Avoid nominalisations – needlessly changing verbs or other words into nouns: e.g. judgement rather than judge, or development rather than develop.
- Imagine you are talking to your reader. Write sincerely, personally, in a suitable tone of voice. Read through what you have written aloud to yourself – does it flow, make sense and support your argument?

Call to action

The NHS will be asked to account for the resources it has used to tackle COVID-19, so it is important that decisions made in a crisis situation are documented. Well written board papers will be essential.

GGI is currently offering an advisory service free of charge to all public sector organisations and their boards. If you have any specific questions on board paper writing or you have any other comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email us at advice@good-governance.org.uk with brief details and we will aim to respond within 24 hours.