



# NED Network briefing

10 May 2021

Set up by [HACT](#) and [PlaceShapers](#), with the support of [Anthony Collins Solicitors](#) and [Badenoch + Clark](#)

## What was it like to be a Board Member during the pandemic?

### What worked for you and what didn't?

#### A discussion led by Alison Inman

(ex-CIH President, current Board Member at Eastlight CH, Saffron HT & TPAS)

Being a board member is relational as much as it is transactional. Now that the world is slowly returning to normal, how do we find the right balance between virtual and in person meetings?

1. For many, **virtual meetings** are convenient and allow those that would normally travel distances for meetings or have caring responsibilities to participate. However, those meetings where strategic decisions are being made can be difficult virtually with the absence of clear body language and the ability to read the room.
2. **Technology matters** – many organisations mobilised in a matter of weeks and moved online, yet the pandemic exposed digital inequality. This also applied to Board Members, so organisations need to check everyone has the means to participate, including costs incurred.
3. **A hybrid meeting model** is likely to be the way forward with a blend over when a virtual or an in-person meeting is most appropriate. With this new way of working, there is an opportunity to review properly whether current Board meeting cycles remain fit for purpose. It may be better to meet virtually more frequently but for shorter periods and then in person for strategic and relational matters.
4. For **new Board Members**, it can be difficult to integrate virtually and build relationships, especially for those who have not served on Boards before. For Boards to be truly collaborative, everyone must feel comfortable enough to participate and share their questions - which can display a lack of understanding or vulnerability that can be difficult for seasoned Board Members when working online.
5. For **Boards to be successful**, relationships must be built and invested in. This aspect is often neglected and must be a focus going forward both between Board Members themselves, Chairs and Executive Team members. Even a weekly email from the CEO on what is going on can help inform, draw in and engage Board Members.



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## Themes discussed

Following a move into break out rooms, group members shared what they had learned over the last year, how their organisations had been working and what improvements could be made.

**Relationships:** virtual meetings do not allow for real personal interaction which in turn often make long meetings tiring. There is no longer the opportunity to network and have informal conversations to get to know each other. Further, digital etiquette often means that people want to avoid talking over each other and so will not interject or feel like they can always ask questions.

Chairs have felt the need to be more proactive alongside conducting virtual meetings, this means taking extra time to check in with Board Members individually and letting them know that their contributions are appreciated.

Board hierarchy can be highlighted in a virtual environment and those people who struggle to interact digitally or new Board Members are sometimes not able to contribute as they wish. Providing opportunities to call on all Board Members in meetings plays to the Boards' strengths.

*Setting time aside before meetings to have an informal catch up can be useful as well as organising team building exercises (eg. 'Would I lie to you?') or 1-to-1 coffee catch ups. For new Board Members, a 'buddy' system can aid integration into the Board and make the process less daunting.*

**Value:** In a virtual world it can be difficult for Board Members to feel valued and conducting difficult meetings online increases risks of people feeling slightly offended or excluded. Again, this links to the importance of relationships, getting to know one another and the increased challenge of chairing these meetings.

*Following up with Board Members individually, especially after difficult discussions, can help dispel any misunderstandings or issues which can be more commonplace in a virtual environment without the ability to read body language.*

**Positives:** A virtual meeting has many positives which can be harnessed. For transactional matters, they reduce the need for travelling for some and means that you do not have to wait long periods for the next meeting. Face to face meetings are important for strategic work and for the relational aspect. It also allows you to be 'present' at the meeting and some miss connecting to the area the organisation works in by attending in person.



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*Bitesize meetings of 45 minutes to one hour can be useful to hear about organisational news or to carry out transactional work. Shorter meetings also make concentrating easier and removes the temptation to multitask whilst attending.*

**Future:** Going forward we must use the in person and virtual hybrid to provide a better collaborative style of governance. We might not quite be at the stage of 'virtual reality' Board Meetings yet but finding a comfortable medium will ensure that Boards can be effective and best serve the needs of their organisation's clients.

*Boards need to think carefully about how hybrid meetings are conducted where some people are together in a room, and others are participating virtually. Keeping different formats and engagements under review is important whilst the future state settles – don't jump the gun!*

**Peter Hubbard and Precious Mealia**

Anthony Collins Solicitors LLP

## Next meeting

**What do Board Members need to think about when developing strategies for achieving Net Zero Carbon?** Discussion led by Keith Hollway, NED and Chair of Asset and Development Committee, Broadacres Housing Association.

4.00-5.00 pm

24 May 2021

**Book your place:** <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZwpfu2tpzkrHfbWruJHbYM6wuKgovIA6EbU>

*The NED Network is a new peer-led group, providing an opportunity for Non-Executive Directors and Trustees on the Boards of social housing organisations to meet and explore contemporary issues of governance, assurance and strategy on an ongoing basis. Chatham House rules apply to all discussions.*

**The network is sponsored by [Anthony Collins Solicitors](#) and [Badenoch + Clark](#).**