

Effective Trustee Meetings

Combining Virtual with Face-to-Face

At the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020, there were real practical challenges to holding virtual meetings for diverse trustee boards.

The initial technology challenge has largely been overcome and in many cases embraced! Now is an appropriate time to:

- Reflect on what has worked well
- Reflect on the ongoing challenges of a virtual meeting
- Consider the form of your meetings in the future – face-to-face, virtual, or a mixture for different purposes?

We anticipate that few pension schemes will revert back fully to the traditional quarterly face-to-face meeting cycle and instead will embrace having some face-to-face meetings with more frequent short virtual meetings.

The balance between virtual and face-to-face meetings will vary from scheme to scheme. We have compiled 10 questions to help you to determine the right balance for your scheme.



1. How easy is it for people to attend meetings in person?

How much time is lost in travel time? Is cognitive depletion an issue for those travelling the furthest? Does a full day out of the normal working environment mean it is sometimes difficult for people to attend, perhaps hampering your ability to attract appropriate trustees? Or is a full day easier to protect in diaries?

Our experience over the past few months has been that regular, short virtual meetings have been an effective use of time and have been particularly successful in driving forward projects or strategic agenda items at a pace.



2. What is the optimal length for an effective trustee meeting?

Typically, face-to-face trustee meetings span a large part of a day, with breaks included throughout. In order to get the most efficient use of time while people are in the room, the best length for a face-to-face meeting may be longer than for a virtual meeting.

Our experience is that virtual meetings are often shorter. This helps to avoid cognitive depletion and maintains the energy and efficiency of the meeting. We suggest that virtual meetings should be no longer than two hours and if that is not possible, frequent breaks should be built in to allow attendees to refresh and grab drinks, snacks or lunch.



3. How frequent should meetings be?

Having shorter (virtual) meetings may necessitate more frequent meetings to ensure that all operations and strategic items are given an appropriate level of focus. Virtual meetings have the potential advantage of being arranged at short notice to handle urgent or timebound issues. Has the approach you have taken to virtual meetings supported you in achieving your business effectively?

Our experience is that in the early stages of COVID-19 lockdown virtual meetings were scheduled monthly or bi-monthly to ensure that strategic items and key governance remained on track.



4. How will agendas be structured?

Where meetings are reduced to a more manageable length, the structure of the agenda is key. Virtual meetings enable more focused discussion, but it is equally important to ensure that non-strategic items are not overlooked. Do some areas work better as a face-to-face discussion rather than a virtual meeting?

We have found virtual meetings particularly effective for small groups such as sub-committees or project working party meetings, so that these areas can move at pace. And we have found items that can be dealt with equally well by email, rather than discussion at a meeting.

Refer to our [“Trustee Meeting Framework”](#) for tips on how to understand behavioural biases in groups and how this may impact the effectiveness of meetings, with tips for how to structure agendas to overcome these challenges.



5. What are the challenges for the Chair?

Virtual meetings present new and different challenges for the Chair to ensure engagement of the group, monitor and manage input from parties and ensure questions continue to be asked. How well has this worked in your virtual meetings? What tools can the Chair use to manage these challenges?

Refer to our [“Behavioural Checklist for Chairing Meetings”](#) for tips on how to combat behavioural biases when planning for and chairing meetings.



6. Has the dynamic of the group changed?

Virtual meetings may change the dynamic of a group, with some individuals becoming more or less vocal than in a face-to-face meeting. How well have group discussions worked on your virtual meetings compared to face-to-face meetings? How would this change if some of the group attend meetings virtually, while others attend in person? Are there any additional steps that could be taken to facilitate active and effective discussions with either your face-to-face or virtual meetings?

We suggest that mixed meetings, where some are attending virtually and others are attending face-to-face, is likely to lead to a poorer group dynamic.



7. Social considerations for an effective board

Virtual meetings may make it more difficult to build relationships within the group and with your advisors. The strength of these relationships is a key factor in the effectiveness of a board. This may present a particular issue where there are new advisors or new members join the group. Do you require at least some face-to-face meetings to build and maintain relationships?

One suggestion to help overcome this issue, is for virtual meetings to open 15-30 minutes early to help engage people on an informal basis (and to allow those less comfortable with the technology to test it out before the meeting starts!).



8. Practical considerations to make meetings effective

In virtual meetings, only one person may talk at a time. Has this improved the tone of your meetings? Would the introduction of other agreed principles help to make meetings more efficient? Could any of these principles be applied to your face-to-face meetings?

In our experience, the effectiveness of virtual meetings can be improved by applying 'virtual meeting etiquette' principles such as the use of 'raise a hand' facilities or actual raising a hand. Also refer to our ["Top ten tips for effective virtual meetings"](#) for other suggestions which may improve the effectiveness of your virtual meetings.

Do you have effective and secure ways of distributing and sharing papers ahead of meetings?

The cyber threat remains real and in our experience trustee boards are taking positive steps to manage and mitigate this.



9. Are there suitable arrangements for signing of documents at virtual meetings?

Face-to-face meetings have the advantage of enabling documents to be signed by the full board on the same document. While virtual meetings may not necessarily preclude this, additional planning might be required to prevent untimely delays.

We have seen effective use of secure electronic signature facilities that are also more efficient to manage than multi-part documents or multiple printing and scanning.



10. What are the cost implications?

Virtual meetings may reduce travel costs for the trustees and your advisors, but holding more frequent meetings may result in additional preparation time and additional costs for writing up minutes.

We think it is important to consider value for money, such as the indirect benefits from improved speed to decision making, as well as the direct costs.

Remember to reflect not only on how you want to use virtual meetings going forward but also how you would structure a face-to-face meeting now. For some trustee boards, there may be some obvious answers to what the new meeting structure may look like. For others you may wish to try out a range of approaches before settling on what works best for you.



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