

How to involve the public as Board members

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Introduction

Public contributors who join the Board of a health or social care organisation can add focus, value, and relevance, but these aims are not always realised. The paragraphs below suggest how to make the most of these arrangements and create maximum benefit both for the board and the public contributors.

The terms ‘public contributor’ and ‘public member’ of the Board refer to people that others may call patients, clients, service users, carers, and independent citizens. Some Boards invite officials from charities or patient organisations to take the role of public member, but this is a contested practice since they are often salaried professionals rather than independent Experts by Experience, and so bring less diversity. The term ‘Board’ is used to include formal Boards, governing bodies and any similar group that oversees the strategy, direction and accountability of an organisation or project.

Start well

Resist any suggestion that the Board should get established before introducing public contributors to the group. It is far easier to start well than to change things later. Why not ask the public contributors to help in choosing which professionals should be invited to the first Board meeting, rather than the other way round.



Sometimes public contributors feel that they have a lower social status than other Board members – they may be less salaried, educated, or knowledgeable about some technical matters¹. To rectify this, offer several places on the Board to public contributors. The Chair of the Board should meet new members to form a personal connection that will facilitate engagement and constructive participation in the Board.

Make this part of a wider involvement strategy

Board membership on its own will not amount to coproduction, so make sure that people are involved in other ways too, ranging from sitting on staff appointment panels and subcommittees to quality checking services and representing the organisation to the media.

Be clear about the skills and experience needed

Set out a role description that shows how the following assets relate to the purpose and function of the Board. This helps suitable candidates to apply and then be assessed and selected in a fair manner.

- Personal - how does the person's life experience fit with the goals of the Board?
- Expertise - do they have skills or knowledge that will help the Board?
- Constituency - can the person bring views from other citizens, such as a patient group?
- Confidence - are they able to relate well to a range of people, including power holders?
- Competence - given support, can they understand and assess reports and charts?
- Question - do they challenge well, ask great questions, and add value?
- Perspective - can they see the bigger picture and the impact on others?
- Integrity - are they principled, objective, and respectful towards others?
- Fair - do they show a commitment to justice and equality of opportunity?
- Eloquence - how effective are they on stage or in front of a camera or microphone?

Offer payment

We expect that the exact reimbursement of receipted expenses will always be offered. Some Boards also offer a participation fee², while others prohibit these payments. People who pay tax or receive welfare benefits are obliged to report any funds received. Obtaining the cash can be a slow process and delays can exclude some potential members.



Prepare for each meeting

In addition to a standard induction programme, public members may wish to meet with one another, the group they relate to, or a supportive staff member before each Board meeting. Here they can look at the non-confidential items on the agenda, plan their contributions and encourage each other. The need for these pre-meetings may fade as participants grow in confidence.

Avoid the special 'involvement' slot

From time to time, the Board may ask for a specific report from the public members. More members of the public may wish to attend this part of the meeting. Ensure that public members feel able to contribute to other parts of the meeting too and that other members continue to recognise that coproduction is everybody's business.

After the meeting

Where the public Board members have a relationship with a wider constituency, they may report back to them after each meeting. This will need to be agreed with the chairperson, so that confidential matters are not inappropriately disclosed. It is helpful for the Board to produce a briefing directly after each meeting that shares the key messages, whilst allowing formal minutes to be ratified at the subsequent meeting and then published on the organisation's website. The briefing should show how the Board has responded to issues raised by the public members.

Provide for Board development

The Board may need help to construct an accessible environment where everyone is able to contribute, abandon jargon and find new ways to conduct business. Are the Public members invited to chair a meeting or lead a Board event from time to time? Board development sessions may help.

If there are difficulties in recruiting, retaining, or engaging public members, this may be a visible sign that the general health of the Board needs attention, so make sure you have:

- Membership that reflects the diversity of the community served by the organisation³.
- A clear purpose and role for the board that everyone understands and supports.
- Individual roles so that everyone knows why they and everyone else is there⁴.
- Defined expectations for members regarding conduct⁵, contribution, and confidentiality⁶.
- Easy Read, wheelchair access, interpreters and more, planned on the request⁷.
- A welcoming and respectful culture that values informality as well as productivity.
- Healthy accountability to the wider public whilst honouring necessary confidentiality.
- A well-defined process setting out how each office is terminated.



Review opportunities and risks

Signs of success include:

- Public members are fully included at coffee, lunch, and other informal times
- All Board members bring something from their personal experience to the meetings
- Turnover rates for public members are like others, giving continuity and freshness
- The people with the least formal power give a good report
- A review of activity shows that Board discussions led to improvement.

Some of the hazards that can defeat the whole process include:

- Tokenism - engage public Board members as an alternative to wholesale coproduction.
- Generalisation – retreat from public member’s radical challenge and practical application.
- Exclusion – set requirements of participating in this Board that shut out important people.
- Marginalisation – demote public Board members to non-voting observers without duties.

Conclusion

When the Board is functioning well, the community it serves will benefit. Involving public members in the Board has the potential to add richness to discussions by enhancing diversity and representation. When the Board involves public members from the start, invests in relationships, nurtures an accessible environment, and learns how to combat inequalities, public members will feel valued. Through clearly understanding their role and bringing independence, ethical sensitivity, and an insistence on practical solutions for the public, they have the potential to improve decision-making.

References

¹ Technical challenges may include (i) understanding the NHS and its regulatory and finance systems; (ii) understanding the rapidly changing interface between health and social care.

² See [Payment guidance for researchers and professionals \(nihr.ac.uk\)](https://www.nihr.ac.uk) and also Bates P (2018, revised 2021) *Experience Pays: How to make money from your lived experience*.

³ See Oliver S, Hollingworth K, Briner R, Swann C, Hinds K, Roche C (2018) Effective and efficient committee work: A Systematic overview of multidisciplinary literatures, *Evidence Base* October 2:1-21. DOI: 10.21307/eb-2018-002.



