

The boardroom paper chase



BoardPacks

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Those within the housing industry will be familiar with the near-bankruptcy of The Cosmopolitan Housing Group back in 2012¹. In light of the report, it was recommended that 'boards should have the right people with the skills and experience to govern well, that the risk the organisation faces is fully understood, and that decisions take account of how this will impact the overall risk profile of the business now and in the future'. With this in mind, Camilla Braithwaite from BoardPacks, outlines the value of online information and meeting management, in overcoming some of the challenges the housing sector can face.

The board meeting may be one of the fundamental aspects of traditional corporate structure. However it is a structure that has remained the same, still relying on hundreds of pages of paper presented and collated up to several weeks before the meeting. At a time when there are budgetary pressures and the need for real-time problem resolution, just how effective is this model today?

The case for change

Since the creation of the Internet and various mobile technologies, we have seen an exponential increase in accessible information. Since many of us have real time access to information via a range of devices, we have the ability to share more information than ever. This of course brings new challenges for board members who are required to be constantly engaged with the organisation, taking decisions throughout the quarter, not just at meetings.

In recent years, resident involvement has become central to the way in which government and local organisations approach the delivery of housing services. The benefits of resident involvement can be considerable, for the business, residents, and the wider community.

Housing association boards are unusual in that only a minority of board members have experience of the type of service that they are governing. In contrast, school governors and board members of healthcare trusts will all have first - or second-hand experience of the relevant service. Including even one or two residents on a housing association board is therefore often seen as being important in ensuring that the focus and strategic direction of the organisation takes account of residents' experiences.

All boards need to ensure that each member receives their paper in a timely and consistent manner, allowing for last minute updates. In the case of Housing Association boards, the vast range in experience of technology means that any software used needs to be easy to learn and use.

Fear of change

There can often be a fear of change at all levels when it comes to housing associations adopting technology – administrators don't want to upset the board and the board doesn't want to spend hours learning how to do something new. In addition, more mature members may feel disadvantaged when it comes to mastering new systems or solutions. However, in order to improve decision-making and alleviate the pressure placed on the board meeting itself, there is an opportunity for members to interact and engage with the organisation far more effectively throughout the year. This therefore requires a better way of information sharing than the traditional voluminous paper board pack. For those who are reluctant to adopt new tools, implementing technology doesn't have to be a complicated process, it doesn't have to generate more work and it doesn't have to cost significant amounts. The benefits however include helping people to do a better job, time savings and enabling more effective decisions to be made.

The successful use of new technologies can bring huge benefits, although their execution does require some consideration. By implementing well designed software and applications, and partnering with a supplier that provides expert training and support for your board, it is easier to convince those who are worried or fearful about using new technologies of the benefits.

PDF distraction

Of course, a few organisations have attempted to remove the paper burden by opting for electronic document transmission, emailing members PDF versions of the board papers. However, with some paper packs being around 200 pages, this can sometimes be a retrograde step. If there is no version control, and there is the risk of creating more confusion during the meeting if for example, a document was changed at the last minute. PDFs also need annotation tools but when board members download third party annotative tools in order to make comments on the papers – these comments cannot be shared easily and are not secured.

In an era of 'information overload', it's vital that any data we hold is presented in the most accessible way.

The 'Google' of board packs

Instead, housing associations should consider the use of meeting tools that provide a fast, secure, and consistent



“I would thoroughly recommend for all housing associations to take this step towards digitising meetings. We feared it may impact on decision making, but this has not been a problem at all – in fact it has helped decision making. The BoardPacks software has delivered efficiency to our processes, paper savings, and now we don't have to worry about the confidentiality of our board papers, improving governance overall.” – **Julie Robinson**, Director of Resources, Watford Community Housing Trust

way of providing that essential board pack. A way that enables board members to access their board papers from a tablet, at any time. Documents can be annotated using simple tools – and these annotations, which are completely secure, can be shared with other board members before, during or after the meeting, if required. With multiple options for where you want your sensitive data stored – hosted, on-premise or cloud based (for users of Office 365) models; as well as a choice of applications for viewing the board papers – Android, Apple or Windows; organisations can ensure the transition to paperless meetings is smooth.

Using specialist governance software to manage meetings comes with lots of small features that are carefully designed to make big improvements to board members' jobs. For example, documents and links can be easily assigned to particular agenda items, making it simpler for members to go directly to specific items of interest. Critically, board members can search current and historic documents effortlessly at any time – including during the meeting, to create a far more interactive discussion and consistent decision-making process.

Improving risk management

During meetings, the board can exploit in-built interactive risk assessment and governance tools to review corporate risks. A heatmap, which presents all of the information on your organisation, including an overview of the risks and their impact as well as their likelihood puts risk management at the board's fingertips, helping them review it easily in a meeting.

Software that integrates risk management into other board tasks helps to take the effort out of this process, enabling the board to protect the organisation from what would otherwise be unforeseen difficulties.

Ongoing engagement

Furthermore, while real time access to information clearly provides a chance to improve the effectiveness of board members during the meeting, the most fundamental change is the way members can interact with the organisation between meetings. By setting up alerts to information on key topics raised during the meeting, members can be reminded of outstanding actions before the next meeting. Boards can also be asked to contribute to decisions outside of the boardroom, with supporting documentation, discussion and voting tools, helping to make the organisation more responsive and agile. This can also lead to more considered conclusions that are less likely to be swayed by more dominant members of the board. The result is a more effective board meeting and an agenda that concentrates on the top strategic issues. This helps to better harness the insight of the resident board members, rather than risk being derailed by incomplete actions, missing information or more minor concerns.

Case Study

Tai Ceredigion is a not-for-profit housing association responsible for over 2,000 properties in West Wales. Its main aim is to ensure that homes are up to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and that tenants receive high quality services. The company's vision is to put tenants first, while providing quality homes that benefit communities and the local economy.

Helping to deliver this vision is a board of 15 members who make up the housing association's four committees. The team hosts quarterly board meetings and bi monthly committee meetings to keep informed on the business' performance.

Preparing paper board packs ahead of each meeting for the board was becoming time consuming and expensive with 20 packs including around 300 pages being printed for both public and private meetings. By switching to a paperless system, the PA to the board was able to cut the preparation time of meeting board papers down from two weeks to just one day.

Dan Shephard, IT Manager, Tai Ceredigion, comments: "We looked at a number of solutions for our requirements, however BoardPacks was the only provider that allowed us to try out the solution before committing to the purchase. We demoed the technology in April and subsequently used it for the first time in our July meeting.

"Naturally, a few of our members took some time to get their heads around using tablet devices but overall the move to BoardPacks has been a great success.

"The decision to use BoardPacks has not only transformed the administration and ease of distribution but also saved Tai Ceredigion money. By comparing the reproduction costs, postage charge and administration time with the purchase of the system and iPads for the board, Tai Ceredigion has already seen a substantial saving."

Given the pressure on housing associations to become more efficient, responsive, and to manage risk better, it is clear that embracing technology at board level can have a positive impact on the organisation overall.

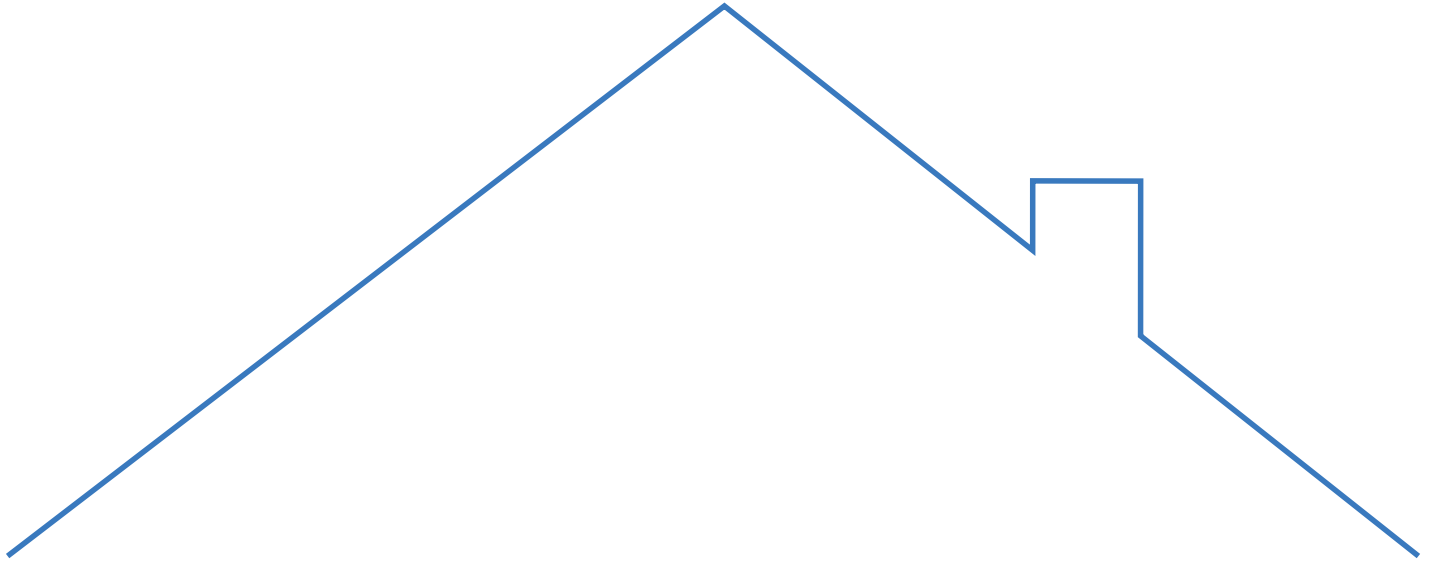
There are several risks set out by the HCA that the housing sector needs to understand and take appropriate action on, including asset related risks, liability related risks, income related risks and cost related risks.

In order for boards to be able to carry out their role to the best of their ability, they need to have the relevant information to hand. By putting meetings, decisions and risk management online and on their tablets, members can easily access information on the train, from home or just before a meeting, increasing efficiency and effectiveness, whilst saving costs.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/372166/cosmopolitan_lessons_learned_report.pdf

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