Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill

West Lothian Public Partnership Forum

The call for written evidence on the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) bill was sent out to all 96 individual members of the PPF and all 34 Community Councils in West Lothian. Twenty-six responses have been received by telephone, post and email. The document was also discussed at the PPF meeting in August where members asked that Julie Cassidy the WL Patient & Public Involvement Officer collate and submit the responses on behalf of the PPF.

The following is the West Lothian PPF’s joint response to the Bill.

Do you support the principle of direct election to health boards?

The West Lothian Public Partnership Forum [WL PPF] would welcome the appointment of more lay members to NHS Boards and these members should be able to represent a wide range of interests, such as service specific user, public and voluntary sector groups. There should also be appointment of a lay member representative of each Public Partnership Forum [PPF] of a Community Health (and Care) Partnership [CH(C)P]. The selection and election of these representatives would be from within the membership of each PPF & CH(C)P. This would simplify the election process as we consider that the interest in "public" elections would be very low.

However, we do not agree with the proposal to directly elect members to the Health Boards. The WL PPF feel that because of the apathy of the public for local government and Parliamentary elections that if an election with public candidates was held, even with high publicity, the interest would more than likely be very low. The number of people voting at a public election for a NHS Health Board election would not justify the expense. It is also the view of the WL PPF that candidates who put themselves forward for election could be “political activists” and may be supported (indirectly) by a political party.

Do the benefits outweigh the costs of running and supporting direct election?

No. Generally the WL PPF feel that although the document states the “The costs associated with this Bill and the implementation of the pilots are modest in the context of current NHS spending in Scotland”. That this is still a significant amount of money and the money would be better spent ensuring that, the NHS engaged more effectively with patients and the public in regards to service delivery and change. This is ultimately public money and it should be spent on enhancing services and not on election processes. The NHS is a complex and technical service and those that are employed to make the decisions should be allowed to do their jobs effectively whilst ensuring appropriate and timely public engagement / consultation processes are adhered to.

What are the risks of having elected members on health boards?

The following direct responses were collated from PPF members -
1. Elections to Boards would be a real disaster bringing politics straight into NHS
2. Political bias, the elections could be used as a route for career Politicians
3. Human nature being what it is we will never eliminate bias - either political or single issue
4. Need to have lay member's on the Boards who are part of PPF structures and can link CH(C)P's and Boards a direct election might impede this process
5. Change criteria of how Boards operate and consult with public - not change whole system by having elections - more complex and not necessarily effective in engaging with people
6. Public members are not experts and don't want to be - we pay professionals to make decisions
7. Stronger communication with Boards and public - for God's sake don't destroy the healthy Boards - it would be expensively messy and they do a good job.
8. Elections are not the easy answer; make more effort to get the right people along to Boards - NHS needs to work harder at it -
9. Direct Election could see political party affiliations
10. Having a Lay Member won't make a difference if accountability structures not changed.

As a means of increasing public involvement do alternatives to direct elections exist?

Yes. As previously stated, the West Lothian Public Partnership Forum would welcome the appointment of more lay members to NHS Boards and these members should be able to represent a wide range of interests, such as specific service user, public and voluntary sector groups. There should also be appointment of a lay member representative from each Public Partnership Forum of a Community Health (and Care) Partnership. The selection and election of these representatives would be from within the membership of each PPF.

The selection of candidates should be made from a pool of people who wish to serve on the NHS Board, and the selection should be representative of geographical and health related interest. Candidates would require, to obtain a number of proposers but their selection should be made by a central committee, to ensure a balance between different patient/public interests.

There should remain the power for the Government to appoint members from business and elsewhere who have the relevant skills to run a multi department business.

The number of Local Authority members should remain as at present otherwise the size of the Boards would become cumbersome and dilute their executive function.

Remove perceived barriers and simplify things so people feel they can be involved more. Ensure more resources are put into groups such as the PPFs.
Currently the management of these groups is unregulated with each CH(C)P supporting their PPF in a different way. If the PPFs were used as they were initially intended, as mechanisms for the CH(C)Ps to engage at an early stage in the service development & change processes, then the public would see the service providers (NHS & CH(C)Ps) as being transparent and working together in partnership with the public to ensure the changes to the service are effective and fit for purpose.

Direct elections will not change the way the NHS works it will only make the Boards more guarded in the way they conduct their business.

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