Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee

Committee evidence session: The 2015/16 audit of NHS Tayside

The Royal College of Nursing Scotland (RCN) will be sending a representative to the Committee’s roundtable meeting on Thursday 15 December at Dundee City Chambers on the 2015/16 audit of NHS Tayside. The RCN understands that this meeting will focus on the experience of patients using NHS Tayside services as well as the experience of staff working for NHS Tayside.

In addition, therefore, the RCN has decided to provide the Committee with this written evidence to cover three areas of concern which are more strategic in nature, and which the RCN feels may be of assistance to the Committee as background.

The RCN wishes to declare that Norman Provan, Associate Director (Employment Relations), has been heavily involved in working within NHS Tayside to review its approach to partnership working. A review of partnership working, following an employment dispute in 2015 in NHS Tayside, was led by the RCN and The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy in partnership with NHS Tayside’s management and staff.

1. Strategic oversight

Whilst the current management of NHS Tayside is dealing with the financial situation, it is important to note the historic nature of the budget situation which had been allowed to develop over time.

The lack of long-term planning and oversight has led to financial crisis, but the lack of strategic decision making and response to changing circumstances over a prolonged period of time has also had a significant impact on shaping services and setting the culture within NHS Tayside.

There has been a creeping development in services, rather than strategic thinking about significant change and service redesign where required and a fully costed plan. This had led to a focus on efficiency rather than efficacy.

When placed in such a position it is understandable that managers have found themselves focusing on the short-term and counting every penny. But the result of that is that long-term, big savings are overlooked and opportunities to reshape and reform services are lost.

The culture within NHS Tayside has tended to be top-down and divisive as a result of managers being placed under enormous pressure to find budget efficiencies. At times, the RCN has been made aware of feelings that the management has been bullying towards members of staff.

The focus on minute budget details and savings has a profound impact on staff morale and confidence. There have been, for example, problems with extensive vacancies; decisions taken not to employ agency staff which results in regular staff not being able to take planned annual leave; and a general feeling of pressure being placed on staff to find efficiencies rather than focusing on their clinical practice and on having an acceptable work/life balance.
Historically, NHS Tayside has had an excellent record of staff working together to ensure that services are provided to a high standard during exceptional circumstances such as large scale emergencies, or during extreme weather. That goodwill has, however, been eroded because of the constant pressure on staff as a result of short-term thinking.

This has led to a breakdown between management and staff working in partnership.

2. Partnership working

The partnership working model in Scotland has been developed over time and has been successful in avoiding local industrial action, although there has been action taken over some UK led decisions, for example, around pensions.

It was clear in 2015, a time when joint working needed to be at the forefront to deliver a shift in culture within the board, that poor partnership working was instead undermining efforts to address the challenges facing NHS Tayside. The four month long porter dispute in NHS Tayside in 2015 is an indication as to the extent to which partnership working had broken down.

At the beginning of the review of partnership working in NHS Tayside, the RCN found that there was little sense of common purpose between managers and staff and therefore between the employer and trade unions. The breakdown led to managers bypassing partnership working processes, and trade unions being unwilling to engage because of the breached protocols. The result was a vicious circle of disengagement, distrust and disempowerment.

Some inter union tensions; frustrations within trade unions around the new Area Partnership Forum model and sub groups and frustration at the lack of employer uptake on trade union requests for clarity on the way forward and the case for change added to the sense of division between staff representatives and the employer. Equally, there was a sense of frustration from the employer around the trade union engagement model and the lack of pace in agreeing change; a lack of understanding from managers about the joint responsibility to deliver change; and a sense of an obstructive approach taken by trade unions in seeking compromise.

Through the review process both the employer and the trade unions recommitted to working in partnership and rebuilding a positive partnership culture, acknowledging that the current model was not working as it should. The review process made various recommendations, emphasising the need for both parties to look at co-production of work with better joint communication processes, and wider engagement for both managers and trade unions with national partnership working structures.

The review process and its outcomes were positive, but partnership working in NHS Tayside is an ongoing challenge. It is essential, however, for staff through their unions and employers to continue to engage and work together for the future, and through this extremely difficult period of acute financial pressure.
3. Quality and safety

Patient care which is of high quality and a safe standard must not get lost in the debate around finances.

There are difficult decisions to be taken in NHS Tayside, and lessons must be learnt from previous situations where focusing on finance, rather than quality, has had an impact on safety.

It is crucial that joint working addresses any concerns around quality and safety as a matter of urgency.

High quality, safe care must remain paramount.