

SPF GUIDANCE ON STAFF ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING



JULY 2014

Hard Truths, The Journey to Putting Patients First, Volume One of the Government Response to the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry, published in November 2013, requested that the Social Partnership Forum (SPF) develop guidance on good staff engagement. This document, which has been developed by an SPF working group, aims to provide that guidance through promoting and supporting effective staff engagement and partnership working in the NHS.

This guidance builds on the six key messages from the SPF, featured in *Hard Truths*, to support the development of the values, culture and working environment in the NHS to ensure that patients receive safe, effective and compassionate care.

Research clearly shows that high levels of staff engagement produces benefits for the NHS, for patients and service users as well as employees and employers. Evidence of this is demonstrated in the work carried out by Professor Michael West and his team at Aston University, based on extensive analysis of data from the NHS staff survey. This has been reinforced by other research studies such as those by the National Nursing Research Unit and the ongoing work by Jeremy Dawson of Sheffield University.

Benefits for patients

Professor West and the Aston team looked at links between staff survey scores over ten years and measures of patient experience. Analysis of the data showed strong statistical associations between improved staff experience, and staff engagement in particular, and better patient satisfaction. There are also positive correlations with lower patient mortality. There has been a lot of debate about cause and effect in relation to engagement, however, Professor West argues that the link is sufficiently strong to draw the conclusion that it is engagement that shapes outcomes.

Professor West concluded that:

"Data from the National Staff Survey reveals that staff engagement trumps all other measures (staff satisfaction, leadership, HRM practices) as the best overall predictor of trust outcomes collectively. It predicts care quality and financial performance (based on CQC ratings), patient mortality (in the acute sector), patient satisfaction, and staff absenteeism, health and wellbeing and stress."

Professor Michael West

Read more from [Professor West's blog](#)

The link between staff and patient experience has also been demonstrated in case study research on nursing, especially on the interaction between staff and patients and how engagement contributes to the development of compassionate care.

Trusts with high levels of staff engagement tend to score highly on the Patient Friends and Family Test which assesses if staff would recommend the organisation where they were treated to their friends or family. The development of the Staff Friends and Family Test will provide further evidence on these issues.

Benefits for employees

Staff survey data shows that trusts that report higher levels of engagement also tend to have higher levels of reported health and wellbeing. Trusts which seek to promote staff engagement also tend to do well on other areas of staff experience such as staff appraisals. They also tend to have a more open culture with higher levels of staff confidence in the quality of care and ability to raise concerns.

Benefits for employers

Organisations where staff report high levels of engagement also tend to have better overall organisational performance and lower than average absence levels. The link with lower levels of absence is especially strong and could enable financial savings.

Trusts that have high levels of staff engagement report that this has helped them deliver: service improvements, better value for money and improved patient experience.

Conditions for engagement

Recent work by Professor West has identified key organisational conditions that need to be in place to generate engagement:

- authentic credible leadership which is trusted by employees
- a clear vision for the organisation which is based around patients
- an open and learning culture
- effective team working
- stable and effective leadership.

These conditions are necessary to create a culture that supports engagement in an organisation and are the foundations for building employee engagement. Professor West's work and other research shows that staff in the NHS develop engagement best where they feel:

- the value of their job role and that their role is valued
- able to be proud of their organisation
- they have the opportunity to be involved
- they have effective appraisals which support development
- they are part of a team with clear goals and good leadership.

In addition, organisations need to ensure that they support the basics of good staff experience (fair treatment for all staff, health and wellbeing and access to training and development) as set out in the NHS Constitution staff pledges.

A culture of low trust or which tolerates bullying and harassment will not help generate engagement. In the NHS, it is especially important that the organisational culture supports staff to speak out on issues of concern.

Recent research by Professor West and others indicates that a stable leadership team with a chief executive that is committed to engagement and is highly visible, has a positive impact. Senior leaders set the tone for the organisation and their behavioural example can have great impact. It is greatly concerning that turnover is high amongst senior NHS leaders – according to the King's Fund it has increased in recent years and will tend to inhibit implementation of effective staff engagement policies.

The role of first level supervisors/ line managers is also critical as their day-to-day interactions with staff will shape their level of engagement. The NHS staff survey shows that perceptions of line manager support have improved but staff do not feel that line managers do as much as they could to seek ideas from staff and make staff feel valued. Line managers need to be supported to promote engagement and feel involved themselves.

Locally developed values that resonate with staff can have a positive impact on generating a feeling of engagement and acknowledgement that the organisation gives priority to patient care. These values need to be expressed in a way that resonates with staff in order to shape behaviour.

A clear and compelling narrative for the organisation that links its goals to the purpose of patient care is essential. This provides the basis for employees to feel part of the organisation and able to contribute to its success. Staff engagement will also be a key element in providing 'compassionate care' as studies have shown that disengagement impacts adversely on the way patients feel about their care.

Employee voice is essential for effective employee engagement. It enables staff to have a collective input into the process and adds credibility. In the NHS, this voice is provided by staff organisations and engagement is developed via partnership working.

Partnership working and staff engagement

Staff engagement and partnership working complement one another. Partnership working assists organisations in developing credible and sustainable approaches to staff engagement, while staff engagement adds a wider dimension to partnership working broadening it beyond the procedural problem solving.

Partnership working principles should be applied to the development of staff engagement policies and in particular to aspects such as the development of values which will have an impact on appraisals. It should also be the basis for implementation of staff involvement.

There are a variety of forms of partnership working in the NHS and various approaches to staff engagement. These are discussed below and within the overall framework of the staff pledges and shows the flexibility that partnership working organisations have in the approach they adopt and develop at local level.

Staff engagement and partnership working between employers and staff unions are also complementary. Staff side representation gives employees an independent voice. Through partnership working, employee involvement helps to generate mutually beneficial solutions to workplace issues. Partnership working should run alongside staff engagement and there are a number of examples where good staff engagement and well developed partnership working are delivering positive outcomes.

Staff engagement in the NHS

The NHS recognises the value of staff engagement and aims to engage staff in their jobs and their organisation. NHS Employers encourages all employers to develop approaches which foster staff engagement. This is also supported by the regulatory framework and by NHS England, though there is no national target.

Staff engagement in the NHS is measured in the national staff survey by asking if employees feel motivated, involved and willing to act as advocates

for their organisation. The NHS has traditionally had high levels of staff motivation and job satisfaction but involvement has been more variable and advocacy is a relatively new concept.

In addition, many organisations undertake their own local surveys or use other mechanisms to seek staff views. The NHS Staff Friends and Family test also seeks the willingness of staff to recommend the service. A small but growing number of organisations also use social media to seek to promote engagement.

The NHS approach to staff engagement has a particular focus on involvement. The NHS Constitution staff pledge 4 refers to involvement on both a collective and individual basis and says that the NHS will seek:

- To engage staff in decisions that affect them and the services they provide, individually, through representative organisations and through local partnership working arrangements. All staff will be empowered to put forward ways to deliver better and safer services for patients and their families.

The NHS is therefore committed to ensuring that staff have opportunities for involvement in decisions which affect them both as individuals and through collective forums such as social partnership forums and local negotiating committees. Involvement is more than consultation and engagement must be based on independent employee voice in order to be fully effective.

In recent years, advocacy or the willingness to recommend the organisation, has been seen to be an increasingly important element of engagement. It is seen as an overall indicator of employee feeling; a 'ready reckoner' of the degree of engagement. This dimension of engagement is the focus of the Staff Friends and Family Test.

NHS organisations adopt a range of approaches in seeking to improve staff engagement. Some have a separate strategy but most seek to build staff engagement into their overall workforce approach. Many are now linking this to wider work on changing the overall culture of their organisation.

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How is staff engagement defined and measured in the NHS?

There are a number of definitions of staff engagement that are used in the economy as a whole, ranging from a traditional focus on job satisfaction and motivation to the Engage for Success movement which has a focus on how engaged employees contribute to business success.

Staff engagement in the NHS is principally measured via the annual NHS staff survey. The survey looks at engagement in three dimensions:

- staff job satisfaction and work motivation
- levels of involvement
- advocacy or willingness to recommend the service.

Under job satisfaction and work motivation, the staff survey assesses issues such as whether staff have a job they feel makes a difference, whether they are committed to their work and whether they feel recognised for their contribution. It does not cover satisfaction in terms of pay and conditions.

The NHS has traditionally had high scores on job satisfaction and motivation due to the intrinsic value of the work and the high level of staff commitment to NHS values. Scores in these dimensions of engagement have remained broadly stable in recent years despite ongoing challenges. However, concern has been expressed that pay restraint may have an adverse impact on staff engagement in the longer term.

The staff survey seeks to assess whether staff feel involved in decisions on changes which affect their working life within their clinical setting, work area and more widely. In particular, it asks if they are they able to make suggestions for change and if their feedback is responded to. The NHS has high scores on the ability to make suggestions but less confidence that these suggestions are listened to and acted on. Overall scores on this dimension have improved in recent years. There has been a lot of activity in this area in recent months.

The survey also asks if staff would recommend the NHS to their friends and family either as a place to work or as a place to be treated. This dimension of engagement is known as 'advocacy' and is increasingly seen as an important indicator of both engagement and overall staff opinion on quality of care. Results on both these scores in recent years

are a cause for concern, although this is in relation to a minority of organisations. This issue is also measured via the Staff Friends and Family Test.

The results on all these measures are combined to produce an overall or composite staff engagement score for each NHS organisation using a five point scale. Full information on how staff engagement scores are calculated can be found on the NHS staff survey website or from NHS Employers.

The average engagement score for NHS organisations has improved in recent years. For example, the scores rose from 3.68 in 2012 to 3.74 in 2013, although there is considerable variation and scores on involvement have improved less than on other dimensions.

Staff Friends and Family Test

NHS England has developed a new measure known as the Staff Friends and Family Test. This assesses staff willingness to recommend the service on a more regular basis than is done in the staff survey and will become a published indicator in August 2014. It is modelled in part on the Patient Friends and Family Test and other research in other sectors. It is based on the idea that employee opinion is a 'litmus test' for quality and will also provide an additional opportunity for staff involvement.

Staff engagement and partnership working in practice

Partnership working and staff engagement are mutually reinforcing. Through local partnership working, staff have the opportunity to influence decision making at organisational level. In addition, staff side organisations can work with employers to identify key issues and work out solutions together.

There are a range of examples of good staff engagement and partnership working in practice such as those highlighted on the [Social Partnership Forum website](#).

Partnership working and staff engagement examples

There are a variety of models for staff engagement and partnership working in the NHS. In all of the cases, the focus has been on working together to improve services for patients and improve value for money.

- At Oxleas Trust, a community mental services provider in South London, there is a long standing approach to partnership working. The trust's human resources director and the partnership representative work jointly on all aspects of employment policy. There are regular meetings to share information and agree priorities. The emphasis is on early identification and resolution of issues, ensuring that line managers and local representatives work together via partnership working. There are joint groups that work to tackle key issue and organisational change. The trust has handled a range of issues in recent years including taking on services from other providers.
- Derbyshire Community Health Services has an agreement which supports partnership working and early consultation on key issues such as change to services. The trust has implemented a range of changes in service provision and works on the basis of seeking to find solutions through a partnership forum.
- Nottinghamshire Healthcare is a mental health provider that has been a pioneer of staff involvement and partnership working. This is based on local problem solving between staff representatives and local managers. This is combined with an innovative approach of staff side representation on the board and good communication.
- Acute hospital trusts such as Wrightington Wigan and Leigh, Guys and St Thomas' and Sherwood Forest Hospitals, have employed a range of different approaches to develop partnership working alongside their successful staff engagement work. The key has been a willingness to seek and act on feedback from staff.
- At Guys and St Thomas' Hospital, a partnership working approach was adopted with the aim of improving services. Using a technique known as Appreciative Inquiry, staff side and managers worked together on ideas generation and problem solving. These ideas were then applied to develop better services.

Staff engagement into practice

For an individual member of staff, the term 'staff engagement' may seem an abstract concept, but in practical terms, a workplace with good staff engagement would offer:

- A good experience at work for staff overall. Employees will only be involved and engaged where their wider conditions of work are good and in particular they feel fairly treated by their manager/supervisor, have working conditions which support health and wellbeing and feel their contribution is valued.
- Their job roles have a purpose and make a difference and they have the freedom and responsibility to exercise appropriate judgement. They should have support and guidance where needed and be given appropriate autonomy to use their skills.
- Their workload should not be unsustainably high and objectives should be set in a way which is fair and benefit patient care.
- Open, regular and honest communication on the key issues that affect them. This could include direct face-to-face methods such as team briefings as well as social media. The key would be that such methods allow for employees to feedback their views rather than it being one-way communication. Organisations should respond in a timely and transparent way to issues that are raised.
- Leaders would be visible at all levels with senior staff being in regular contact with those delivering care and available for discussion and responsive to concerns. There would be a visible senior management team that is in regular contact with colleagues.
- Consultation should be an ongoing process where business information is shared at the earliest opportunity before proposals have taken final shape and where there is a chance to influence decisions. This should take place at all levels.
- The organisation should respect and value the contribution of all its staff. This can be done in simple ways such as managers taking an interest in staff and thanking them when a job is done well, through to formal awards ceremonies and non-financial staff recognition schemes.

“Employees will only be involved and engaged where their wider conditions of work are good”

- Line managers would have appropriate training and support to develop engagement and undertake their role in ways that foster good engagement. Goals would be set in a clear way linked to improved patient care. Bullying and harassment would be tackled and any staff concerns on quality of care would be properly addressed.
- Staff would be involved in developing ideas for improvement and be able to participate in developing the organisation. Their contribution would be sought and ideas acted on. There would be a range of ways of seeking staff feedback including surveys.
- There would be partnership working that gives an opportunity to develop and influence decision making both within their own work area and more broadly.
- There would be an open culture where staff are able to raise issues of concern. Staff would be aware of and have confidence in reporting procedures.
- Patient care would clearly be the top priority of the organisation and all staff would be able to identify how their role contributed to it. Effective use would be made of the Staff Friends and Family Test to promote engagement and improve quality.
- Progress on these issues would be measured via the staff survey and other methods for seeking staff opinion and involvement. There would be feedback on actions taken and reasons given where action could not be taken.
- Locally developed pulse or temperature check surveys are in addition to the annual staff survey and the new Staff Friends and Family Test. The organisation should make effective use of the data from the staff survey and the Staff Friends and Family Test. In particular, it should seek to utilise the data from the free text box.
- Back to the ward/open door conversations with senior leaders can play a great role in promoting involvement. There are many different ways to organise these – the key is that the format and environment allow staff to raise issues.
- Face-to-face meetings have an essential role but can be complemented by use of social media and email. There is growing use of social media in the NHS and NHS Employers has produced a [guide to increasing staff engagement](#).
- In meetings, care should be taken to ensure that all staff can participate. Trained facilitators should be used and staff side unions should also be included.
- ‘Big/little conversations’ where groups of staff meet to identify issues on a collective basis. These can help foster group identity and build better team working. Big conversations usually take place with a proportion of staff from all areas of the organisation. Little conversations tend to involve staff from particular areas.
- Suggestion schemes or ideas generators – where staff have a chance to put forward their ideas for change. These can be taken forward using joint evaluations.
- Formalised consultation through working groups or other methods that enable employees to give a collective response and provide a forum for debate. A number of trusts have implemented change programmes or service change via partnership working between the employer and the staff unions.

Approaches to involvement

Review of recent implementation of improvement programmes in the NHS highlighted that staff involvement was a critical factor in their success. Without the active involvement of staff, there will be fewer ideas expressed and feelings of disengagement amongst staff may grow.

There are a range of methods that can be used to seek ideas from staff ranging from Appreciative Inquiry to the Productive Ward programme. A small number of organisations have even developed their own version of the ‘Dragons’ Den’ in which staff are able to develop ideas for improvement which are then evaluated by staff and management representatives.

Involvement methods can take a number of forms. Some widely used approaches are set out below. Where these involve bringing groups of staff together to discuss changes that may have an impact on job roles, it is recommended to involve staff union representatives.

Assessing organisational performance on staff engagement

Within each organisation, staff can see the overall staff survey score and the scores for each question. The relative performance of the organisation on these scores can be assessed over time. An organisation can also be compared with the performance of other organisations of a similar type. Variations within an organisation can be identified and assessed depending on the staff survey report it gets from its provider.

In addition to the national staff survey, many organisations also undertake their own local survey or have additional methods for seeking staff feedback. They may also have various methods for involvement of staff.

Involvement gap?

Scores for staff involvement within the NHS have been improving since 2012 but remain below what the NHS should aspire to and there is considerable variation between organisations. In general, feelings of involvement are greatest around decisions at ward or area level and less strong for decisions taken at overall organisational level. NHS staff feel fairly confident that they can make suggestions for change and improvement within their own ward or department. They are less confident that these suggestions are acted on although this score has also improved.

There is no official national target for staff engagement although NHS England does believe all providers should seek to improve their scores annually and NHS Employers seeks to provide support to enable them to do so.

Regulatory framework

In the past, regulators have not had much of a focus on staff engagement issues and have not sought to assess staff engagement as part of their inspection processes.

This has now begun to change with the staff survey results included within the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) basket of indicators. There is growing recognition of the link between staff experience, engagement and patient experience. Monitor now also includes staff survey scores in the data it looks at as part of its role in assessing governance. Many commissioners are increasingly interested in this data. The publication of data from NHS England's mandatory Staff Friends and Family Test will also highlight the issue and provide an additional set of data.

In the most recent round of CQC inspections, there has been a renewed focus on staff engagement and its impact on quality. The CQC has sought to ensure it organises focus groups with staff as part of the inspection process

Staff engagement is now being given a much greater prominence within the work of the CQC. Key staff engagement measures from the staff survey now feature in its assessments and are taken into account in its inspections. In recent months, staff engagement has been a factor that has been a catalyst for the CQC to instigate an investigation, a reason why a trust has been put in special measures and a factor in enabling a trust to come out of special measures.

The Social Partnership Forum is in ongoing dialogue with the CQC around staff engagement and effective ways to measure it.

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