Innovation to Improve Outpatient Clinic Efficiency

The team at Bolton consider the programme a success and the improved patient and staff satisfaction has been rewarding for all those involved. Some of the learning they developed from their experiences includes data collection and use.

Good quality data and analysis has been essential. Collecting data and being able to understand the current situation were key to identifying where challenges lay at the outset.

At the start of the programme little relevant information was available and even less had been collated and analysed. By using a lean tool called ‘quality function deployment’[i], which helped to prioritise work based on customer needs, the teams compared data across specialities and created a reference document for answering queries.

Data collection from within the outpatient clinics became a priority. Analysis of this information highlighted the issues within each department and helped refocus ideas. Constant referral to the tool and data analysis kept changes focused on the important issues.

Having good quality data available made challenging perceptions easier. The audit showed that errors were occurring before patients reached their appointment and so the focus shifted from clinical practice to more apparent process issues.

As with most improvement projects, staff engagement was challenging. There was a risk that the divide between outpatients and clinical services might reduce involvement with the work – for projects to succeed the team needed full engagement. Initially there was some lack of interest, with outpatient clinics being considered lower priority, but extensive engagement work overcame this. The team used the data to demonstrate key issues and by created what they called ‘burning platforms’ that staff could identify with. Any non-clinical issues were led by non-clinical support services.

Overall, initial data collection and engagement activities were more time consuming than expected. There was initial frustration with how slowly the programme started, but as the work took shape it has become obvious that the changes were making a significant impact. As the programme began to demonstrate its worth, momentum picked up.