

Speaking up: Resolving NHS complaints and preventing problems from recurring: learning from the project

Key findings

- The peer review process showed that the trust made significant progress in some areas of complaint handling, including providing complete responses, good quality explanations, improvements in the way in which complaints were investigated and a named contact for the complainant to liaise with. However, performance in some areas was static and there was a drop in the number of complaints being dealt with in a timely manner, which brought down overall performance.
- The trust set a target of 55% of closed complaint cases being judged as 'satisfactory' or above. The October 2012 analysis produced a score of 50%, but the January 2013 score fell to 40%.
- Survey data shows that the trust is not yet achieving its targets around complainant satisfaction with the response received from the trust and complaint response times.
- The Complaint Support Service supported 18 individuals during the course of the project. Feedback from service users was very positive, although there was no evidence that the service helped to resolve complaints more quickly.

Successes

- **Measurement tools:** By the end of the project, 10 trusts were taking part in the complainants survey, providing valuable benchmarking data. The complainants survey, peer review methodology and scorecard, and good practice standards for complaints handling developed by the project have the potential to be used across NHS organisations to scrutinise and compare complaint handling performance, and to incentivise improvement.
- **Building community relationships:** Local people helped to design the complainants survey, providing an example of how the trust is committed to listening and responding to the views of the local community.
- **High quality volunteers:** The project benefited from support from committed and capable volunteers, such as local magistrates, who contributed a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

Challenges

- **Data collection:** Both the complaints survey and the peer review system were refined during the project, to improve the quality of the data being collected. These changes made it difficult to compare data over the lifetime of the project.
- **Recruiting storytellers:** The team experienced difficulties with recruiting patients and staff to share their experiences through digital stories. For patients, one of the factors was the time required to film each story.
- **The scale of the task:** The team came to understand that transforming complaints handling requires improvement across a very wide range of areas, which can only be achieved with consistent engagement and support from clinical staff, complaints managers, divisional managers and executives. The wider improvement challenges being addressed at the trust and organisational change taking place in the NHS added to the complexity of the task.

Advice to others

The project team recommends establishing a staff working group early on in the process so that the group can begin engaging and influencing stakeholders in the organisation. Members of the group should have the opportunity to attend peer review panel sessions to see at first hand how complaint investigations and responses are evaluated.

The team advises that the staff working group has a clear place in the trust's governance structure, so that problems are raised quickly and clinical directorates can be held to account on performance issues such as response times and the quality of responses.

More information about this project

The Patients Association are publishing the results of the peer review panels. The results so far were published on their website.