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## **EAST LANCASHIRE HOSPITALS NHS TRUST FOSTERING A POSITIVE CULTURE FOR SPEAKING UP**

### **Background/the challenge**

East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust (ELHT) employs 7,000 staff across five main hospitals (Blackburn, Burnley, Clitheroe, Accrington and Pendle) and various other community sites in the North West. The trust treats over 600,000 patients per year.

ELHT was placed in special measures in July 2013 following Sir Bruce Keogh's review, which investigated the quality of treatment provided at hospitals where the mortality rates were higher than average.


Changes in governance occurred in 2013/14, which included Christine Pearson joining the trust as director of nursing in January 2014. She found that staff were reluctant to speak up and she had concerns about poor communication and a lack of openness in the trust. Across ELHT, there was a drive to improve the organisation's culture of speaking up.

### **What they did**

Board visibility has been a key part of the improvements that ELHT have made in fostering a good speaking up culture. Christine has promoted and embedded a positive culture by leading by example "I effectively walked the floor to begin with," explained Christine. Visible clinical leadership had a positive effect on staff and allowed her to understand the issues faced by teams on the frontline. Christine operates an open-door policy and encourages all staff to come and speak to her.

Christine works closely with Jane Butcher, the Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) guardian at ELHT. Jane has a background in human resources rather than nursing and Christine says this independence has been really useful, as has Jane's longstanding relationship with the unions. Staff see Jane as approachable and because she has a 'direct line' to both Christine and the chief executive, they are confident their concerns will be escalated appropriately, and quickly.

For example, when a nurse approached Jane with an issue concerning care on the ward, Jane reported it to Christine that same day. "We held a meeting that day



around the problems they raised and had an open discussion. We now have an action plan in place and are meeting regularly to see how things are going”, said Christine.

The same openness is shared across the trust with other directors. Kevin Moynes, director of human resources and organisational development, gives his mobile details to every new starter. “Everyone said it was a mistake and I’d be on the phone all the time. In reality, I’ve had four calls in the last four years” said Kevin.

Board continuity has also been a crucial part of creating a good environment for speaking up. “There had been a lot of interims before us,” explained Kevin. “When the trust was put in special measures in 2013, a period of intense change followed with new directors and a new CEO.” Since then, there has been more consistency in senior positions.

Jane, as staff guardian, has dedicated much of her time to being visible and communicating her role; she makes a point of visiting the peripheral sites, not just the five main ones. When new starters arrive, they receive an induction on what Jane does, while Jane hands out business cards and displays freedom to speak up posters. She also sits on various committees to ensure the raising concerns agenda is well represented.

Allowing staff to take ownership of patient safety improvements has also helped encourage speaking up. By consulting staff and making changes based on their experiences on the ground, the team has been able to avoid the tendency for new senior management to come in and impose changes quickly with a top down approach. Now Christine and Kevin say the staff really live the trust’s aim of providing ‘safe, personal and effective care’ and think about their work through those three themes.

## Promoting good practice

In her first meeting with ward managers, Christine asked if anyone wanted to mention any good news they had. “You could hear a pin drop”, she explained. Since then, holding regular meetings and placing emphasis on good practice has provided dividends, with more staff attending to share successes: “We had to move to a bigger room” says Christine.

Christine believes sharing good practice can be done alongside discussing the negatives and during these meetings conversations are regularly open and frank. She says staff are much more comfortable coming forward. “Staff don’t wait to come forward now, they highlight any problems immediately. There is no waiting for the meetings.”

The trust has also avoided the tendency to reinvent the wheel and has been working with and assisting others with their culture, and in making sure services are safe. “NHS England approached us to help out another trust who were in special measures. It’s nice to have that recognition” says Kevin.

## Successes

Since May 2017, over 100 cases have been raised to FTSU guardian Jane. These include long-term whistleblowing cases, cases of staff aggrieved with HR processes and most commonly, cases of bullying and harassment.

While retention rates at the trust have improved, absence rates are still higher than the trust would like. However, the trust was named in the HSJ/Nursing times best 100 best places to work and according to staff survey results, things have improved considerably across the organisation.

However, Kevin acknowledges there is still a long way to go. "It takes a long time to form habits", he explained. "I feel like we've improved the climate rather than the culture, things feel different even if they're not always shown by the statistics at the moment."

### Top tips

- ✓ A good environment for speaking up starts at the top. Boards need to be engaged, involved and know why a good speaking up culture is so important. Where there can be continuity, this is even better.
- ✓ However, the actual changes and *owning* the changes should come from staff where possible, as they have to be on board to make it work.
- ✓ Does speaking up fit in with your organisation's trust or mission statement? Is it ubiquitous, and something staff think about all the time?
- ✓ Engage with other organisations and other resources externally and internally where possible, don't try and reinvent the wheel.

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