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Case Study

Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust – staff engagement in improving patient experience

This case study is one of four, commissioned by NHS Employers and written by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES). The case studies and research highlight the relationship between patient experience and staff engagement at high-performing trusts in the north east of England, and identify common themes between them.

Read all the case studies and a summary of the common themes at www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement.

The trust

Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust provides a range of acute hospital services at Queen Elizabeth Hospital. Additional services are provided at specific sites, including Bensham Hospital, QE Metro Riverside, a range of GP practices and community bases, and Blaydon Primary Care Centre.

The trust has seen considerable change in the past few years, with the opening of a new pathology laboratory in 2014, which processes non-urgent diagnostic pathology work for the whole area south of Tyne. This was followed in January 2015 by a new, state-of-the-art emergency care centre (ECC) that provides a single point of entry for people who require medical, surgical or paediatric emergency care, short stay, frailty assessment and integrated diagnostic and support services. In 2016, the trust took on community services which increased staff numbers by around 500 to 4,200.

Gateshead gained a good rating from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in 2016, with the four categories of effective, safe, responsive and well-led being assessed as good and the fifth category of caring as outstanding. However, two of the trust’s mental health services were identified as in need of attention. The trust took immediate action to rectify the concerns raised, which did not only address the must-do and should-do CQC requirements but also involved an intense engagement period with all staff across the multidisciplinary teams.

Led by the trust’s senior management team, there was a keen desire to involve, include and engage with all staff to ensure the changes that were clearly required were owned,
implemented and sustained. Although the engagement activities - including one-to-one interviews with all staff, thematic reviews of the feedback, and open workshops and planning sessions designed by the staff - were challenging at times, this approach was adopted in pursuit of true staff engagement.

The 2017 NHS Staff Survey results show Gateshead’s overall engagement score, at 3.91, as being considerably above the average for similar trusts of 3.78; in addition, a summary of all key findings has the trust as above average for similar trusts for 28 out of 32 key findings.

The trust consistently hits the challenging standard of 95 per cent of people being admitted, transferred or discharged through the emergency department within four hours.

Gateshead has been shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards: the Nursing Times award for patient safety information, the Health Services Journal (HSJ) award for improved partnerships between health and local government, and the HSJ provider trust of the year. This builds on previous successes and the trust’s annual staff awards ceremony.

**Linking the patient experience and staff experience**

Gateshead rates well in the NHS Staff Survey for key finding 32 - effective use of patient/service user feedback. Its score of 3.77 in the 2017 survey is considerably above the average of 3.69 for combined acute and community trusts.

The Friends and Family Test is seen as very useful to the trust, because it is easily accessible, and the results are available very quickly.

The trust has recognised clear links between the patient and staff experience, via the survey results that are published at approximately the same time. There is a strong belief in the trust that happy staff makes for happy patients, so for the past two years there have been away days and other meetings at which the two sets of results are examined and discussed in detail. Problem areas are highlighted, and team leaders identified to take the results back to their teams to explore in more detail. Gateshead finds it is best to take two or three issues from the surveys and focus on tackling these as a two-year objective, recognising that it will take time to make a difference. In addition, all departments can select up to three areas that they would like to tackle as a team.

Over the past 18 months the trust’s workforce and nursing teams have worked closely together within the What Matters to You and Joy in Work frameworks to bring together what matters to patients and what matters to staff. This has created rich conversations and positive outcomes for all.

In the 2015 NHS Staff Survey results, the trust noticed unexpectedly high levels of staff reporting incidents of violence. This naturally caused concern, especially as it was not
reflected in the patient experience data. A six-month task and finish group investigated the issue and found a correlation between incident reporting and areas where staff can find themselves dealing with aggressive behaviour among patients (e.g., emergency medicine and mental health), and where reporting of incidents is encouraged. The group’s findings led to campaigns saying that violence was not acceptable, and the trust was pleased to see levels of violence dropping in subsequent NHS Staff Survey results.

The trust’s approach to people management

The importance of staff

The trust is fortunate in having a stable, loyal and long-serving workforce with some families in the local area having several members working there. Turnover is low and the incorporation of community services went very well. However, other changes have been a little more difficult for staff, particularly some of the longstanding members of the workforce who did not all see the need for change.

The overall approach to people management has changed considerably in the past three years. The personnel function used to be centralised and based on a separate site, and was mainly transactional in its dealings with staff. The focus has shifted radically to empowering line managers and giving them the confidence and skills they need to manage their teams effectively day-to-day. This has allowed the workforce team to flourish and add value in different ways.

Major efforts are being made by the workforce function to get people issues and the staff experience higher up the agenda in the trust, so that it seen as important in the same way as clinical issues are seen as important.

The trust has a people strategy with six strands, each giving a clear framework for action. The diversity and inclusion strand, for example, is sponsored by three board members and has objectives related to patients, staff and managers. One aim is to ensure managers are culturally competent in their relations with people from different backgrounds. However, the trust admits that it is difficult to ensure that every single person knows about the opportunities available to them, such as development opportunities.

On top of all this, in 2017 the trust introduced a staff diversity forum, Your Voice, which is intended to give all staff groups a greater voice and influence over the trust’s actions.
Engaging and involving staff

Gateshead finds that the best way of interesting and involving staff outside their day job is to keep messages simple and to cascade them through line managers, rather than issuing corporate messages which are not always well received.

The trust has focused heavily on partnership working with trade union colleagues; a diverse group of people who have a lot of experience and understanding. This positive working relationship is very beneficial and is of particular help when the workforce team is trying to understand any resistance to change. Partnership away days between staff side and workforce colleagues will continue to ensure this open and honest dialogue is maintained.

Recruitment

In some areas the trust struggles to recruit, in particular radiologists and operating department practitioners, which are areas of national shortage. However, in general the trust finds it relatively easy to attract staff because of its friendly, family culture and smaller size. Staff who might otherwise have gone to larger neighbouring trusts because of their reputation are sometimes attracted by the idea of being a bigger fish in a smaller pond and by the opportunities a smaller trust offers for people to get involved.

Health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of staff is a priority of the trust and it has invested in excellent occupational health services. Throughout 2018, a greater focus has been placed upon mental wellbeing. This follows the introduction of a clinical ergonomics and physiotherapy service for staff, which reduced musculoskeletal-related absence significantly. Early mental wellbeing actions have included debriefing training for key individuals across the trust [ie site team managers] to enable debriefing sessions after particularly challenging shifts and/or serious incidents. The trust has also introduced a bite-size training session, with associated guidance documents, for line managers to feel confident in speaking to teams about mental wellbeing. All of this builds upon the trust’s internal mediation service, the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, and bullying advisors, who are all available to resolve workplace disputes.

Values

The trust has always had a strong vision and values. Recently, these have been refreshed by staff, with the key value of respect being emphasised. Very importantly, a set of behaviours associated with each value has been identified and these are being embedded in recruitment, appraisals and management training.
Learning and development

The trust’s main focus has been management development for line and middle managers. To assess the type of support and development required, it held focus groups with managers, and found that a big issue for them was confidence. As a result, development sessions for managers were introduced with the aim of equipping managers with the skills they need to manage their teams confidently.

Apprenticeship leadership programmes have now been introduced for new managers, with a package of bite-size sessions every month lasting one or two hours for new and existing managers. Topics include holding courageous conversations, tackling a mental health concern, and conducting a sickness absence review.

The insights discovery tool, which helps people to understand their behaviours and reactions to different situations, is proving popular. It assigns colours to different behaviour types that allow staff to understand their dominant colours related to their behaviour. People seem to enjoy describing themselves in terms of these colours, and it helps their self-awareness and therefore has improved team-working and interpersonal relationships.

Gateshead uses Investors in People to give an external perspective of how well the trust is performing in relation to people management, and the trust is proud to be a Silver Award holder against the new sixth generation standards.

Advice to other trusts

- It is important to really listen to staff and take your cues from them. Understanding your staff will help you to go about things the right way.

- Senior people (including non-executives) need to be visible and accessible. It is particularly important for people to recognise the leadership team and feel able to approach them.

- Use the evidence base, notably the patient and NHS Staff Survey results and the Friends and Family Test, as these show how opinions and experiences are changing in response to interventions.

- External validation (such as Investors in People) can also give credibility and reassurance.

- Understand that embedding new things takes time, and there can be a dilemma here with regard to the required pace of change.
The IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in employment policy and human resource issues. The author of these case studies is Dilys Robinson, a researcher on employment issues who has worked extensively on staff engagement issues in the NHS.