

UNISON Scotland

Scottish Parliament – Health and Sport Committee Inquiry into NHS Governance – Creating a culture of improvement

Introduction

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union and represents staff in most areas of activity within NHS Scotland. UNISON welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to Health and Sport Committee on NHS staff governance.

Background

UNISON Scotland was a key architect of the Staff Governance Standard. We remain committed to it and believe it is an exemplar model which goes beyond the core values of even the most well regard staff engagement and consultation models. The Fair Work Convention has also highlighted the standard as an example of best practice.

The strength of the model was confirmed in a study undertaken by Nottingham University, which said they had taken *“arguably the most ambitious labour-management partnership so far attempted in the UK public sector and made it work”*. Research co-author Dr Peter Samuel said: *“Although partnerships are found elsewhere in the public sector, NHS Scotland’s stands out as distinct and novel. It has survived for over a decade, defying reorganisation and changes in administrations, and it can offer valuable lessons in how to improve industrial relations. Anyone wanting to understand how government, employers and staff should work together to deal with strategic and organisational challenges can learn from it.”* The study also praised the way NHS Scotland separates broad-ranging debates over strategic issues from detailed discussions over specific workplace policies.

Staff Governance is a key component of the Industrial Relations model in the NHSiS. It has assisted in the smooth delivery of significant service changes and ensured that the NHSiS has enjoyed an unprecedented period of industrial harmony.

Does the NHS adequately implement the requirements of the Staff Governance Standard (detailed above)?

The NHSiS is a significant employer and is massively complex. It would be foolish for UNISON to take the view that all Boards are able, at all times, to implement the Staff Governance Standard fully and consistently and this is reflected in staff surveys.

However, UNISON believes that for the most part the NHS Boards in Scotland understand the requirements of staff governance and endeavour to comply with the obligations upon them.

The Staff Governance Standard is measured in various ways; not least the regular NHSiS staff survey. Whilst there are positives in the most recent survey, it is clear that there is room for improvement in a number of the key standards. In particular, surveys indicate that the model has worked best at a strategic level and is more challenging at the operational level.

Are there particular areas of the standard it implements well?

There are many examples across NHS Scotland where local managers, trade unions and staff are working well and thereby meeting the standards. The staff governance standards give unions and workers early notice of planned change and in the best practice examples, ensure that staff are involved at an appropriate level in decision making.

The Staff Governance Standard has enabled a wide range of service redesign initiatives to be implemented smoothly. These range from reorganising out patients and theatres to massive change such as the move to the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Glasgow. The strength of partnership over other models is the engagement of staff and their representatives at all stages. This means that change is more likely to be sustainable over the long term.

Across the NHSiS there is a significant investment in communication with staff, which is not to say that everyone reads the various forms of staff bulletins or that there is absolute consistency in the quality of information disseminated at team briefings. However, there is a commitment to ensure that information is provided for staff, if they want to absorb it.

Despite the financial and service delivery pressures, NHSiS still invest significant resources in staff training and support. UNISON specifically highlights the investment in Health Visiting; increased intakes of student nurses and midwives and Nurse Practitioners as an example of government, health boards, staff, communities and unions working together to listen and respond to each others needs.

The commitment to Modern Apprentices in the NHS being paid a wage and in many cases guaranteed a job, is a fine example of the Staff Governance Standard at work.

Are there particular areas of the standard that are not implemented well?

There is no doubt that meeting and living up to the Staff Governance Standards was easier during times of budget expansion, when messages were broadly positive and services benefited from investment and expansion.

Today, NHS Boards, staff and unions are operating in an environment where service redesign and transition often means 'cuts' and therefore services are reduced. There can be little doubt that this environment has impacted on how well the Staff Governance Standards are implemented and met.

The pressure on local managers to implement savings plans, means that in some areas there is an undue haste to push forward. The welcome existence of enabling agreements, such as Organisational Change, means that in some areas, managers are not as diligent about the need to speak with, listen to and be reactive to staff concerns.

The creation of Integrated Joint Boards and the need to shift the balance of care are emerging issues in many areas, as health services and workers find themselves managed on a daily and strategic basis by non-health professionals. As a result there is a need for IJB's and Health Boards to vociferously champion Staff Governance and to ensure that there is no dilution of the standards for affected NHS workers.

At face value the NHSiS has done well to ensure that a vast majority of staff have completed a KSF development review and this is to be commended. However, there is a growing scepticism that this is a 'tick box' exercise and that the vast majority of staff don't see a direct benefit to them, their job or career advancement.

Conclusion

UNISON has argued that we must think beyond the current narrow structures and professional silos. We must invest in our workforce and use their skills, experience and commitment to the full. That is why we published the UNISON Skills Charter in 2016 (<http://www.unison-scotland.org/2016/09/29/health-in-unison-skills-charter/>). We believe that the Skills Charter is a blue print for success.

The Scottish Government has announced that it intends to refresh its approach to Staff Governance Standard Monitoring to ensure that the process is adding value and driving improvement. We are happy to work in Partnership to develop proposals to ensure that a mechanism is in place which remains fit for purpose and which provides meaningful and relevant information both nationally and locally.

Given the changes in NHS leadership at all levels since the Standard was introduced, it may also benefit from some refresher training, particularly at middle manager level.

For further information:

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