

Commissioning for public engagement

Don Redding, head of policy at the Picker Institute Europe, discusses the importance of effective planning for patient and public engagement strategies, if the benefits are to be reaped

Last year I worked with a PCT that had experienced the worst of the last NHS financial clampdown, during a ‘turnaround’ process in 2006. The cuts and withdrawals of service deeply damaged its stakeholder and community relationships.

Local MPs were outraged by the financial mismanagement; councillors angry at attempts to shift the bill to social care; neighbourhoods and schools upset at losing community health services; and the variety of ethnic communities wounded by the withdrawal of funding and dialogue.

Then along came World Class Commissioning’s injunctions to be a local leader and to base all commissioning on ‘proactive, continuous and meaningful’ public engagement.

Would that framework, and the recognition that patient experience is central to quality (Department of Health, 2008), mean that from 2008 all would be different? Is patient and public engagement (PPE) now irrevocably entrenched in the mainstream?

By early 2009, a Picker Institute Europe survey (2009a) showed the beginnings of a cultural shift in PCTs’ strategies for engagement, accompanied by considerable investment.

Two thirds of PCTs said they were increasing their cash budgets for PPE. Half were increasing their

spend on communications. Three quarters said they were increasing the number of posts for PPE, and over 60% were recruiting new staff for social marketing, public health and communications.

PCTs reported ‘significant’ or ‘sweeping’ changes in their organisational culture, with chief executives and their directors taking responsibility for the PPE strategy, recognising its centrality, and beginning to spread the message that it is ‘everyone’s job’.

Yet even as these changes begin, the NHS chief executive warns that the service may lose £15–20 billion from 2011 to 2014. PPE, like every aspect of health care, will be under scrutiny. Will the future be like those ‘turnaround’ experiences of the past?

As they plan their budgets for 2011, will PCT directors wonder exactly what their financial investment in engagement is buying? With evaluation so poorly developed, how will they judge its effectiveness? How will an ambitious engagement programme be traded off against cuts to services that achieve mandatory national targets?

If PPE has a year to prove itself, it is vital that investment is used where it really counts. Worldwide evidence shows that interventions in patient engagement—enabling individuals to take more control of their care and treatment—have a payback to the service (Picker Institute Europe, 2007).

Engaged patients are more knowledgeable about their condition, better equipped to manage it without emergency treatment and hospital admissions, more likely to adhere to prevention and treatment, and will choose treatments that are often less costly than those which clinicians might select.

Such evidence does not exist for the effectiveness of public engagement; however, there is useful literature on the potential for deliberative engagement (Picker Institute Europe, 2009b), where citizens are closely involved in deciding on the way healthcare resources are used and services are prioritised.

A key priority for PCTs now should be to plan citizen participation in their budgeting and decision-making for the ‘austerity’ years, so that public engagement is not the victim of the cuts, but rather the legitimating process that gives local health services their mandate for the future rationing of resources. BJHCM

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