

An Acas intervention at Basildon PCT: Building employee involvement and partnership

How Acas helped an NHS Trust tackle change management using improved employee involvement in decision making¹.

The Challenge

Basildon Primary Care Trust (PCT) was established in April 2001. It provides community services and primary care, and funds secondary services. Employing around 400 staff, it has recognition agreements with five trade unions. In mid-2003, the Trust approached Acas for help because its Joint Staff Forum (JSF) – comprised of representatives from management and the trade unions – was widely considered to be ineffective. This was due to several factors. First, as a result of the restructure that formed the Trust, some managers had little experience of working with union representatives. Second, many trade union representatives – including the Chair of the JSF – did not represent the views of staff in the Trust, as they had been seconded from other NHS sites.

Meetings were unproductive. They had low attendance, and there was no consistency in who represented the management side. Forum members tended to get bogged down by trivial issues at the expense of more important concerns, such as creating a common set of policies and procedures to reflect the newly established Trust. Matters were not helped by the lack of a dedicated HR function (though a Head of HR was later appointed) and overall, progressing workplace changes was proving difficult.

However the general climate of employment relations in the Trust was perceived by both management and trade unions to be good. Union representatives felt that meetings were open and positive, but management felt that there was scope for improving how managers and representatives worked jointly on issues, in partnership. Against this backdrop, Acas was approached to advise on how to improve the effectiveness of the JSF. This was underlined by the looming roll out of the NHS Agenda for Change pay modernisation programme, and its emphasis on partnership working between NHS trade unions and management.

How Acas helped

Acas organised two facilitated workshops. Their aim was to find solutions to improve the functioning and effectiveness of the JSF, and to look at ways of increasing numbers of employee representatives on the Forum, including representatives of non-union employees. The first workshop was attended by senior or strategic level management and union representatives and focused on ways of placing the Forum at the heart of the change programme at the Trust. The second involved operational managers and union representatives and considered practical strategies for improving employee 'voice' and the functioning of the Forum.

There was a high level of participation among workshop participants, who described the events as having an open atmosphere, with good group dynamics. Both workshops involved a variety of exercises to draw out general views of employment relations issues and identify concerns. The Acas adviser also facilitated group exercises designed to tease out management and union views of each other and help participants develop problem-solving skills. This allowed participants to arrive at a vision of 'where they should be' and what was needed to move towards this.

Action plans were generated at the end of workshops, and the Acas adviser produced a report for the organisation of what had been discussed and agreed during the workshops. These were used by the head of HR and staff side chair (lead union representative) to produce a combined action plan. This was taken to the Forum for approval and a JSF sub-group was established to take the plan forward. This sub-group met on a monthly basis, and included the Head of HR, the Chief Executive, an HR advisor and the staff side chair. The key action points for the sub-group were: for management to work with the unions to increase the number of staff representatives; to appoint two non-union staff representatives to the JSF; to consider who should attend the JSF from management; to establish the terms of reference of the JSF; and to consider broad training for management and union representatives on a variety of HR issues.

The benefits: improved consultation

The action plan formed the basis of the JSF's work over the following year, and most of the points were put into action, with clear and tangible outcomes. Overall, employee representation and involvement in decision-making has increased within the Trust. The number of trade union representatives has increased, with more involved in the JSF. The five new JSF representatives have been formally trained and



accredited by unions; one non-union representative is in post and a second will be appointed from an under-represented staff group.

The Trust now also has seven dedicated, accredited trade union 'Agenda for Change representatives', who attend JSF meetings when Agenda for Change items are discussed, a move that has been welcomed by both the union and management. It was acknowledged that without these representatives, the JSF would not be able to deal effectively with Agenda for Change.

The composition of management representatives on the JSF is also now more consistent and management presence has been strengthened. Both the union side and HR agreed that the Forum's effectiveness has been greatly improved (the Head of HR noted, "When you walk into the JSF now, the room is full"), and the Forum now deals with "meaty" rather than "trivial" issues. Meeting agendas are more clearly delineated, with time specifically allocated for tackling strategic issues, and there is a clearer view of which issues should be dealt with by the JSF, and which should be resolved locally, at department level. A union representative described how policies are now discussed through clearer and more open consultation processes, which has resulted in the Forum becoming "more efficient" in dealing with issues. According to the union, the Forum has been particularly effective in harmonising a range of policies, "Which desperately needed doing".

For the Head of HR, the improvements in representation and consultation have also had tangible benefits for the general climate of employment relations. The high level of trust between management and union has had a positive impact on staff. Positive feedback indicates that staff are happy with how Agenda for Change is being implemented and communicated to the workforce.

The longer-term benefits: building partnership

Throughout 2004, Acas helped the Trust implement the action plan further by delivering training workshops for managers around broader HR issues, including attendance management, and running workshops for management and trade union representatives on partnership working. This was deemed important in taking forward Agenda for Change, but also represented an opportunity for the Head of HR to "see if we had partnership" and to assess how far the organisation had gone down that route. For her, the extent of joint working between staff and management had improved immeasurably, with clear benefits for the implementation of Agenda for Change.



The partnership workshop also led to the insertion of jointly agreed principles of partnership into the organisation's trade union recognition agreement, as well as a statement on facilities time and a suggested staff charter (which would incorporate a set of principles on employee involvement within the Trust). For the Head of HR, these new developments demonstrated how far the Trust had come on its "journey" towards partnership.

Overall, the workshops led to a number of positive outcomes and the effectiveness of the JSF was greatly improved. For management, this had the benefits of facilitating change management more effectively, whilst the unions benefited from the strengthening of union structures and organisation. Representatives of the union and HR at the Trust were very positive about the role that Acas had played in the organisation, suggesting that without Acas, the organisation would not have "moved on" so quickly. These positive perceptions were clearly related to Acas' position as an independent and objective body, as well as its expertise in the field of employment relations. As the Head of HR and staff-side chair noted:

"We're extremely satisfied ... our staff reps have felt confident with Acas facilitating workshops, and certainly trust them. If we brought in an external HR consultant to do this I don't think there would have been that level of trust and confidence. They (Acas) are the experts on employee relations issues, they've got a wealth of knowledge on doing this sort of work and supporting organisations. So, I couldn't think of anybody else that could be better than them, for that sort of role."

"We do a lot of training and I think that the quality of the Acas workshop is excellent. ... the three days that I've attended have just been stimulating throughout, open throughout, they've had a very definite outcome, which is what you want. It's been very, very well led."

¹ This case study is based on interviews carried out with Acas advisers, and trade union and management representatives at Basildon PCT as part of Acas' evaluation programme. We are grateful for their assistance and reflections on the project. A more detailed version of this case study may be found in Acas Research Report 06/05 'Acas in the NHS: Helping improve employment relations in response to 'Agenda for Change''.

**For further details please contact Acas Research and Evaluation
at research@acas.org.uk**

