

How Acas helped Wolverhampton City PCT get partnership 'back on track'

A case study of how Acas helped an NHS Trust improve relations between management and unions and get a suspended partnership agreement back on track¹.

The Challenge

Wolverhampton City Primary Care Trust (PCT) was formed in April 2002 following a merger of the Wolverhampton Health Care Trust, the local Health Authority, and three local Primary Care Groups (PCGs). It employs around 2,000 direct staff, and has recognition agreements with 11 NHS trade unions. Following the formation of the PCT, a series of organisational changes and contract renewals were initiated as part of the process of standardising policies and procedures across the new organisation.

In the late 1990s trade unions and senior management at Wolverhampton Health Care Trust approached Acas to help them set in place a 'partnership' approach to management-union employment relations. Through Acas' assistance and DTI Partnership Fund support, a Partnership and Staff Involvement Agreement was eventually concluded. According to the HR Director, this led to a "productive" culture characterised by "lots of regular open dialogue at most levels" and increased staff involvement throughout the organisation.

However, the sustainability of the agreement was seriously threatened by the restructuring of the Trust and its evolution from a Health Care Trust to a PCT in 2002. In the words of the HR Director, this was due to stakeholders in each of the merger organisations "coming to the table with very different history, baggage and expectations". Additionally, the newly-appointed Chief Executive and senior management team had no experience or 'ownership' of partnership working within the Trust. There was also a question mark over the commitment of middle management to the partnership approach. According to the Acas adviser, this group found partnership difficult because "it removed their authority as managers, if they're asking people to participate in decision making".

Whilst the unions recognised that this was a problem amongst a minority of managers, trust in the partnership was beginning to erode more generally, as the unions believed that they were being 'sidestepped' by management in terms of important decisions relating to organisational change. Matters came to a head in September 2003 when a service was put out to tender by management without prior consultation with the union, representing a breach of Trust protocols.

The unions suspended the partnership agreement. Given the momentum that had developed in relation to partnership working over the previous three years, this was perceived by both management and the trade union side as a major setback. Despite the suspension, both sides claimed to be committed to the principles of working in partnership and recognised that something needed to be done to get partnership 'back on track'. In view of this, after informal discussion between management and trade unions, the staff-side secretary (lead union representative) approached Acas for help.

Acas can help

Following the initial approach, the Acas adviser who had originally assisted the Trust in formulating the partnership agreement arranged a meeting with the Trust's HR director and staff-side secretary, who explained the issues surrounding the suspension of the agreement. The possibility of an away-day facilitated by Acas was suggested. Ever since the suspension of the agreement, informal discussion and "some repair work" (HR director) had been taking place between the staff-side secretary, HR director and the Chief Executive. A clear view had emerged as to what was needed to get the agreement back on track, and the role that Acas could play as part of this "recovery programme" (HR director).

The Acas adviser developed a workshop programme that not only explored the immediate issues relating to the suspension of the agreement, but which also reviewed the underlying "values, principles and barriers to partnership working". This was essential given the change in personnel that had occurred following the formation of the PCT. The adviser's goal was to "get some common understanding amongst the group of people who were there, rather than the group of people who had come up with the definition".



Another key objective of the workshop was to reach a joint acknowledgement of the need to, at times, 'agree to disagree'. For the HR Director, "It was important to acknowledge that disagreements would arise", but the issue was "how people behaved during those times". The principle itself was included in the original agreement, but for the Acas adviser it was something that needed to be fully discussed and recognised if the partnership approach was to be sustained.

The Acas-facilitated half day workshop was attended by 25 trade union and management representatives. Despite the breakdown in trust that had led to the suspension of the agreement, participants agreed that the workshop was productive, was very effective in reviewing the shortcomings of the partnership agreement, and was relatively free of tensions. The HR director noted: "There were some healthy debates ... the more challenging part of the day was when we talked about ... how, when things are getting heated, do we keep the dialogue going?". By the end of the workshop the partnership agreement had been rewritten and "agreed to, there and then" and an action plan for implementation was formulated. The workshop and its outcomes were perceived very positively, as the staff-side secretary explained:

"Both sides wanted the partnership to work again and that was made clear from the beginning. And when we talked everything through, how we all felt, that's why I came out feeling so positive, because both sides felt the same."

The benefits: re-building and sustaining partnership

Both management and trade union representatives felt that the partnership agreement would not have been sustained without Acas' involvement. Whilst discussions and much "repair work" had been taking place internally following the suspension of the agreement, the HR Director suggested that she was "not sure if the organisation would have moved forward without Acas". Indeed, as the staff-side secretary noted, "If Acas had not got involved there would have been a very high likelihood of a dispute", with the partnership agreement "going into termination".

Following the approval of the revised partnership agreement by the new Trust Board, partnership has been rolled out across the PCT and, according to management and union representatives, appears to be working effectively. As the staff-side secretary



noted, "Since (the workshop), things did get back on track, things have worked a lot better". In order to ensure that the message of the Acas workshop was firmly instilled across the organisation, a further round of 'working together' training sessions were delivered by senior union and management representatives. These sessions were specifically aimed at educating line managers about the principles and values of partnership.

That the partnership approach is back on track is evident in the way the Trust is dealing with the implementation of Agenda for Change. A series of joint project boards were set up to tackle specific aspects of the programme and a number of staff 'away-days' were held to inform and engage staff about the nature of the programme and its likely impact within the organisation. And information about Agenda for Change is now shared openly with the workforce, promoting understanding of "what is happening and why". The HR director stated:

"We've got true engagement ... we've had joint training with managers and staff-side representatives, and they deliver training jointly. It's a lot of joint ownership ... (it's a) momentous process of organisational change, and to do that you need to bring everyone along with you. What this process has done, by reinvigorating the principles of partnership, means you've been able to do that through joint processes."

The robustness of the partnership agreement was tested further in early 2004, when the PCT was faced with a difficult financial position. For the HR Director, whilst this was not a "straightforward" matter, there was an "open dialogue" about the problem and the partnership approach was not disrupted.

In summary, both management and union representatives saw the benefit of Acas involvement in "bringing two parties with the same idea back together" (staff-side secretary). Importantly, the experience of Wolverhampton PCT demonstrates the value of Acas interventions in sustaining partnership within a context of organisational change, in turn providing a platform for implementing Agenda for Change.

¹ This case study is based on interviews carried out with Acas advisers, and trade union and management representatives at Wolverhampton City 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''.

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