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Laying the Foundations for Governors in Hackney

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Around east London “the hospital for Hackney” is the well-known description of the Homerton University Hospital reflecting its strong local reputation. In its first three months as a first wave Foundation Trust, the Homerton came to appreciate that developing a strong Council of Governors meant far more than relying on goodwill. The challenge was to convert the principles of cooperative membership and the legal status of a public benefit corporation into something people in this highly diverse and deprived urban community could identify with and want to influence. One health commentator remarked about the Homerton when it was on the first wave starting block, “I can think of no other Trust that would be a better pioneer for this fascinating managerial, political and public experiment.” Fascinating the first three months proved to be and the experiment has only just begun.

The Trust’s goal was to start moving the governors from an alliance of self interest to an effective Council taking collective decisions – capitalising where possible on their professional, cultural and religious diversity.

We aimed to develop governors who were:

- knowledgeable and confident about their governance role and relationships
- had a clear approach to their work around strategic processes and membership development
- ready to take decisions as a team
- able to form positive relationships with the Board of Directors and Members.

To help achieve this, the Trust commissioned a specialist consultancy, The Moore Adamson Craig Partnership (M·A·C), to devise and deliver an induction and development programme extending from the initial Governors meeting in early April 2004 to their first full business meeting at the beginning of July. M·A·C's approach, coordinated by the Director of Corporate Development and Head of Corporate Affairs, helped the Governors start answering the big questions: "Who are we? What do we believe about ourselves, the Homerton Hospital and our community? How do we want to work with each other as a Council, with the Board and with the Members?" It was resource and time intensive for everyone involved, but undertaken as a key investment in the Trust's future. A Kings Fund report "New Forms of Democratic Accountability in English Health Services" due in autumn 2005 will reveal whether our approach paid off.

Six principles underpinned the Governors' induction programme from April through June 2004:

- everyone is following a **pathway**
- each stage is part of a **describable journey**
- learning is **progressive**, building on preceding parts.
- activities are **user-driven and self-assessed**
- activity format is **accessible**
- individual time use is **flexible but focused**

M·A·C consultants used a range of activities during the three months, including

- mapping exercises of the Homerton's "health landscape"
- identifying an expandable resources pack supplied item by item as the programme developed
- open learning exercises – sharing personal and group beliefs and values; perspectives on the hospital and its services; public services and partnerships in Hackney with results reported back and discussed.
- completing a "future gazing" time capsule at the initial meeting about anticipated successes and challenges, to be opened in April 2005 on the Governors first anniversary.

The induction programme spread over three half-day group sessions, some afternoons and some evenings. Learning activities were interspersed with presentations from legal advisers Cobbetts about the FT constitution and MUTUO, a member focused organisation, on the membership strategy. The Trust Chief Executive introduced the governors to the strategic

decision making cycle - *plugging into planning*; the Director of Corporate Development led an exploration of the membership strategy - *plugging into people*; and, by Governor request, the Director of Nursing, explained how the Trust handled and learned from comments and complaints taking care to explain how governors can utilise existing systems and processes. The Trust's Finance Director presented the risks and opportunities of payment by results and financial flows in an imaginative and user friendly format leaving the governors wanting to learn more.

Between sessions, individual Governors had 1 to 1 meetings with the Trust Chairman, during which they explored motivation and aspirations. Governors went on small group hospital walkabouts with the Chair, posed for their Council of Governors ID badges and chose what committees and groups they wished to join.

M·A·C conducted a mid-point “reality check” in May. A confidence measurement questionnaire revealed an encouraging level of positive engagement and satisfaction with the induction programme. Half way through, we found that Governors' expectations were tempered with realism about the novelty of the role and the daunting task of persuading people in the community to get involved with the fledgling Foundation. Overall the Governors stressed the importance of getting to know each other better as the key to working together effectively. They also recognised the danger of the “sponge syndrome” - soaking it all up but not having practical things to do - and were determined to avoid it.

M·A·C's analysis of a concluding satisfaction exercise in July following the completion of the induction programme showed the majority of Governors agreed they had overcome initial hesitancy about determining their role and goal and could balance factual learning with confidence building skills. They recognised their journey from passive to active: terms like “conduits/ambassadors/guardians” were beginning to have real meaning for them. There was an eagerness to step on board the strategic planning process and to think outside personal/patient experiences. They said they felt well-supported and ready to make a contribution individually and as a team. Most importantly for our membership goals, they expressed growing confidence to recommend participation as Members to others. Three months was a short period in retrospect although it felt much longer while we lived and learned through an intensive programme. We met the challenge of getting the Governors “fit for purpose” to handle their first formal business meeting at the beginning of July.

At the end of that meeting our Governors agreed a “basis for the conduct of affairs in the interest of the hospital and its membership” and recommended it to the Board of Directors.

Their words expressing their beliefs, values and the way they wished to move forward speak for themselves:

- “making strategic contributions that will help ensure the achievement of an accountable and responsive Foundation Trust within the principles and standards of the NHS”
- “working closely together, widening the membership base and scrutinising the Board when necessary”
- “operating in a diverse community by understanding and respecting the values and beliefs of others.”
- “taking independent and principled decisions and communicating them effectively.”

The first three months taught us that the small things mattered to Governors as much as the big governance issues:

- the Trust team and M·A·C consultants had to respond quickly and adapt to different levels of demand from individuals and the group
- time and resources had to be dedicated to booking dates, arranging suitable meeting times around religious holidays, work and family commitments;
- producing and distributing materials, gathering in feedback questionnaires, arranging security pass photographs, selecting culturally appropriate refreshments, reimbursing expenses and a myriad of other tasks consumed much more energy and time than anticipated
- the logistical implications of large working meetings in a busy hospital building must never be underestimated
- participation has to be “penalty-free”, so easy parking, quick expenses reimbursement and good communications really matter to Governors
- the induction activity mix had to be adaptable and flexible once underway to reflect the pace of Governor engagement and developing ownership

We have identified some early success factors that can be recommended to existing and candidate Foundation Trusts facing similar challenges

- an enthusiastic Chair with excellent people skills is indispensable to link and lead the Board and Council of Governors
- a good Hospital Secretary and Corporate Affairs team is crucial
- participation generated through active learning drives Governor confidence, enthusiasm and team building

- induction programme content must keep interest and attendance levels high, especially from staff and stakeholder governors with many demands on their time
- knowledge of personal and group beliefs and values underpins the competencies that Governors need to develop to carry out their role

The Homerton's annual meeting at the end of September was the first big public event as a Foundation Trust with a Council of Governors. The standing room only crowd who turned up – compared with only a handful the previous year when Homerton was only an NHS Trust – was a graphic indication that something had undeniably changed in this way this hospital relates to its community. The foundations the Governors have laid as representatives of that community should prove to be a durable basis for our continuing development as “the hospital for Hackney”.

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