Case Study

Working with Wolverhampton NHS Primary Care Trust to manage change and build partnership

The background

The restructuring of Wolverhampton NHS Primary Care Trust to a PCT in 2002 put severe strain on its partnership agreement. Now employing 2,000 staff and with recognition agreements in place with 11 different NHS trade unions, the trust embarked on a series of organisational changes and contract renewals. With a new management team, that had no history of partnership working within the Trust, relationships did not improve. Following a dispute over a service that had been put out to tender, the unions suspended the partnership agreement.

Despite this development, both management and employee representatives claimed to be committed to the principles of partnership. Recognising that action was needed to “get the partnership back on track”, Acas was asked to help the Trust to improve the effectiveness of its partnership working.

How Acas helped

Acas set up and ran a joint workshop to explore the “values, principles and barriers to partnership”, attended by 25 management and employee representatives. A key objective of the session was to reach joint recognition of the need, at times, “to agree to disagree.”
As the HR Director noted: “It was important to acknowledge that disagreements would arise”…but the key was “how people behaved during those times.”

The workshop reviewed the shortcomings of the existing partnership agreement and developed a new one that was agreed by everyone.

**The results**

The revised partnership agreement is working effectively, and a further round of training sessions on working together has helped embed it across the trust. Both management and employee representatives felt that partnership would not have been sustained without Acas’ involvement. The HR Director observed that she was “not sure if the organisation would have moved forward without Acas”. The lead Unison representative noted that: “If Acas had not got involved there would have been a very high likelihood of a dispute” with the partnership agreement “going into termination.”

The partnership approach is helping the Trust to implement the Agenda for Change programme. A series of joint project boards have been set up to tackle specific aspects of the programme and a series of away-days – with joint presentations from managers and employee representatives – have helped to engage people about the changes and their likely impact.

In the HR Director’s view, information is now shared more openly and the partnership is stronger. Acas’ involvement helped to sustain partnership working in the context of far-reaching organisational change at the Trust.