

Insights from the 'Provider collaboratives: improving equitably' programme

About 20 percent of what determines our health through our life, including illness, is our access to healthcare services. Trusts have a pivotal role to play in addressing this challenge.

This digest considers some emerging learning on the leadership role board members can play to hard wire equity into improvement at trust level and across provider collaboratives, drawn from our [Provider collaboratives: Improving equitably](#) programme.

"Equity is about us working harder to make it fairer."

Bob Kirton, chief delivery office and deputy chief executive officer

Key considerations for boards

- Public health expertise is valuable and is worth investing in at trust level but needs leadership to prioritise. Some trusts are making joint appointments with their local council to bring public health skills into their trust and are sharing this expertise in their work across system partners.
- Such expertise can build understanding at board level, and helps bring in tangible solutions, for instance, making use of the English indices of multiple deprivation, which go down to postcode, and can be incorporated in the planning and delivery of healthcare.
- It can also play a key role in helping to embed an equity focus into quality improvement work, supporting agreement on measures and language as well as ambitions for change. QI methodology gives frontline teams the tools to make change happen on equity. This expertise can also help ensure that QI does not inadvertently widen inequalities.
- It takes proactive effort to speak to people that find it a struggle to access services, and working through system partners helps. VSCS partners can also support staff to engage people in an inclusive way, and to think about how lived experience input is valued appropriately, for instance, reimbursing people for insight provided as a key part of co-production.
- Robust data analysis is vital in building an understanding of how services play out for service users. Improvement interventions that do not proactively track impact on equity may inadvertently make things worse.
- Working on this agenda with partners locally is motivating, and opens up the opportunity to learn from each other, collectively supporting staff understanding around inequalities.

First steps: What board leadership for improvement with an equity lens looks like

- Bringing a focus on equity into improvement can be brought into wider board discussions such as cost and how it is affecting performance. It is not a separate issue.
- Talk to system partners and teams on the ground so it is a joint mission.
- It requires a mindset change, recognising that the current system of access is based on 'first past the post' which is not always the best way for everyone.
- An equity lens on improvement applies to all three key areas of the board: assurance, strategy and culture, and each needs consideration.
- Look elsewhere and borrow from others, and don't be afraid to learn a lot from mistakes.
- There may be a need to build belief at board level and this takes time – some people may be quick to challenge this change initially.
- Shift from assumptions to real insight by proactively reaching out to get lived experience of both staff and local people. Understanding what motivates people, fostering one on one conversations to build understanding and share perspectives, and hearing from those closest to the issue helps align people. Go out into the community.
- Use experts to inform thinking around improvement with an equity lens and socialise the subject to create wider ownership.
- Help teams get access to the data that helps them identify where to focus energy. This may involve working with system partners and navigating barriers that will take time to overcome. Do not let perfection be the enemy of good.
- Invest in accessible analytical support for this work and look at how you may embed it into day-to-day reporting and through committees. Evaluating and sharing data can galvanise partners and internal team buy in.
- The board need to recognise their own demographic profile and what biases this may create - the facts, figures and narratives through this work may challenge what you know. Board members need to be prepared to have the challenging conversations on their own prejudices - **including on race** - and how this impacts their leadership behaviours and priorities.
- To really embed a focus in tackling inequalities requires strong leadership and sustained commitment. The chair can play a key role here, taking up the agenda and supporting alignment across the board and its sub-committees.
- It's also pivotal that the chief executive is committed, supports investment and ownership across the whole board. Executives getting behind this work, asking how they can help, showing curiosity, can motor it forward.
- They can also help celebrate progress, especially that gained through collaborative work with partners locally, which motivates teams.
- Within and between collaborating trusts, conversations in grand rounds, in ward teaching sessions and during huddles are all opportunities to have conversations and identify advocates keen to take on a QI approach with an equity lens.