Service user engagement and health service reconfiguration: a rapid evidence synthesis

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Declared competing interests of authors: Jane Dalton is a publicly elected governor at York Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.

Published April 2015
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03170

Plain English summary

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Health Services and Delivery Research 2015; Vol. 3: No. 17
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03170

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The need to fully engage patients and the public in discussions and decisions about changes to the way health services are delivered (reconfiguration) is generally recognised. Proposed changes (such as moving services from one place to another) are often unpopular. Effective public engagement may help to overcome people’s objections (sometimes by changing the original proposals). In contrast, inadequate consultation may lead to proposals being delayed or challenged in the courts.

The purpose of this research was to assess what is known about effective patient and public engagement in reconfiguration processes. We did this by searching for and summarising relevant information from published research and relevant websites. We were particularly interested in overviews of research and examples of good practice relevant to the NHS.

We found that patients and the public have been engaged in a wide variety of ways ranging from public meetings and distribution of information to the use of social media. In general, engagement was most likely to be successful when the process started at an early stage of planning service change, offered opportunities for genuine interaction and was led and supported by health professionals. Problems were most likely if NHS organisations did not pay enough attention to issues considered important by the public. NHS organisations should report on how they have involved patients and the public in decisions about changes to services. They should also evaluate the results of the consultations (e.g. how satisfied people were with the process and what was actually done as a result).
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The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme as project number 13/05/11. The contractual start date was in March 2014. The final report began editorial review in September 2014 and was accepted for publication in December 2014. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health.

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