

Making the most of quality improvement expertise in tackling today's big challenges

- Four key learnings from boards

Across our **Trust-wide Improvement programme**, supported by the Health Foundation, trust leaders are reflecting on the role improvement at scale is playing in supporting staff and service recovery as they emerge from the pandemic. Most trusts have some experience of quality improvement, usually within specific services and divisions. However, the largest and most sustained benefits come when a whole organisation approach to improvement is taken – many of the trusts rated as outstanding have established trust-wide improvement approaches in place. This briefing sets out some key considerations for trust leaders, shaped by conversations with improvers from the **Q Community** and through our recent member engagement.

1. Rebuild social networks to support recovery from the pandemic

Listening to the expertise in the organisation is critical to success. Create collaborative spaces where people can come together to work on a shared problem, and where they are actively supported to offer improvement ideas – this empowers staff to input into the trust's improvement process. The role of an improver is about connecting with staff at different levels and listening, and boards can benefit from their ability to provide an understanding of context, settings, relationships, and ranges of perspectives.

"Improvement work is enjoyable work to do, and the NHS is an enjoyable place to work. Boards need to create the spaces and time for staff to enjoy the improvement process"

Dr Darren Kilroy, executive medical director,
Countess of Chester NHS Foundation trust

"Our knowledge is held in our people"

Dr Sara Barton, consultant acute medicine and clinical director for quality improvement, The Northern Care Alliance and member of Q

2. Provide a route for improvement ideas to succeed

The effort to get an improvement idea off the ground is huge; boards can enable this by providing a route to success through the governance of the organisation. Support innovation by providing space to test ideas and accept that a business case may not always be possible or needed. Boards have a critical role to play in creating a culture where improvement is not something you need permission to do but rather an expectation of all staff. It should be embedded in all staff roles and encouraged in one-to-ones, appraisals and general staff meetings.

"Reserve some ground to allow flowers to bloom"

Abigail Harrison, chief of digital and innovation, North West Ambulance Services NHS Trust and member of Q

"We work in an incredibly complex system and have to go back to involving people, with communities of practice and active participation in improvement strategy"

Dr Sara Barton, consultant acute medicine and clinical director for quality improvement, The Northern Care Alliance and member of Q

3. Be authentically and effectively visible as a board

Aim to be more visible in a way that has impact, by providing more access to the board for all members of staff, for instance through existing staff networks focused on improvement. This will help key improvement ideas be heard from a wider cross section of staff and stakeholders. Visibility also improves confidence among staff that their views are being heard, with the task afterwards to display how these ideas have been listened to and acted upon. Also, a focus from the board on all the good work that organisations do each day can be powerful, with leaders working with their communications teams to seek out, share, and unashamedly celebrate it. Improvers can also help inform how limited board time is best spent in this way.

"What does visibility mean? [...]listening and being aware of someone's situation, helping them feel confident and reassured that raising an idea can find its way through to a meaningful space to be considered."

Dr Darren Kilroy, executive medical director, Countess of Chester NHS Foundation trust

"It's time for the board to connect and make time for its improvers"

Abigail Harrison, chief of digital and innovation, North West Ambulance Services NHS Trust and member of Q

4. Bring together improvement and staff wellbeing

Boards are rightly concerned about staff wellbeing, and what often makes staff feel better is fixing that one issue that is keeping them up at night. Ask staff what the board can do to help them in their daily challenges. This brings the thinking about improvement and staff wellbeing together and offers more gains for investment. Building direct links with improvers can also help the board in their own roles, offering better ways to understand data and ideas on how to focus both on performance and improvement.

"Boards are human beings, and also worn out, and befriending your improvers can help"

Dr Sara Barton, consultant acute medicine and clinical director for quality improvement, The Northern Care Alliance and member of Q

Finding out more

Our [Trust-wide Improvement programme](#), supported by the Health Foundation, helps senior leaders at NHS trusts to develop their understanding of **improvement at scale** - both organisation-wide and beyond the boundaries of a single provider. It provides **space and time to learn from peers**, exploring approaches to improvement together and supporting leaders to develop the skills and confidence they need. It also helps boards members **navigate and access resources** that will support them on their improvement journey.

These insights are drawn from our Annual Conference 2021 breakout session on ['How boards can make the most of quality improvement expertise in tackling today's big challenges?'](#).

Other support resources include:

[Deliver and Improve – A board members guide to trust-wide improvement](#)

[Deep dives into the board's role in improvement with Central London Community Healthcare Trust and East London NHS Foundation Trust](#)

[Walking the talk: Board actions that enable improvement](#)

[Key questions on improvement for boards](#): what to ask yourself and others

Contact the Trust Wide Improvement team via email twi@nhsproviders.org.com for information on further events and to share your experiences of improvement through the programme.