

Nottingham University Hospitals Trust Quality Account 2021/22

Comment from Nottingham City Council Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee

The Nottingham City Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee welcomed the opportunity to discuss the Trust's Quality Account 2021/22 with colleagues from Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust and is pleased to be able to comment on it. The Committee's comments focus on areas in which it has engaged with the Trust in 2021/22.

Maternity services have remained a key concern of the Committee. While the focus and attention of the Trust on this issue is acknowledged, the Committee has been concerned about the pace of change and improvement, and took the step of escalating these concerns to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Care Quality Commission. Such concern is reflected in the need for an independent review of maternity services provided by the Trust to have been commissioned by NHS England and Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Clinical Commissioning Group. Given the focus of the Trust on maternity services, it is concerning that there were still not sufficient governance and oversight processes in place to prevent issues occurring which necessitated the Care Quality Commission issuing a further Section 29A Warning Notice in relation to maternity triage in March. The Committee welcomes the recruitment that is taking place in maternity services and the increase in time allocated for staff training, but it is concerning that significant workforce gaps remain due to absence, vacancies and issues with retention which, the Committee understands, is a significant challenge for the service. While some of this will relate to local, organisational factors (which are commented on below) the Committee acknowledges the workforce challenges nationally.

A number of the failings identified by the Care Quality Commission in relation to maternity services in 2020 were also reflected in its findings of how well the Trust as a whole is led. These findings were particularly concerning to the Committee because leadership and governance impact on the quality and safety of care provided by the Trust as a whole. The Committee is of the view that high quality, credible leadership is crucial for driving improvement in the Trust and is pleased with the appointment of a new Trust Board Chair and, more recently, recruitment of a new Chief Executive. The Committee was particularly concerned by findings of the Care Quality Commission in relation to bullying and discrimination, specifically allegations of bullying attributable to racial discrimination, in the workforce. Given the nature and scale of the issues identified by the Care Quality Commission and in staff surveys, the Committee was surprised that reference to these challenges and the need for cultural change did not feature in the draft version of the Quality Account document seen by the Committee. The Committee notes the changes made to improve processes for escalating issues from ward to board, but would like to highlight the importance of having clear processes for escalating issues within the ward to ensure that front line staff are properly listened to.

It is also important that the Trust listens to its patients. The Committee commends the generally positive feedback from Friends and Family Tests but considers that the response rate is too low to give confidence that it is reflective of the full range of experience. It is good that work is taking place to train more staff in relation to the test, and the Committee would encourage efforts to be made to increase take up of this survey and other methods of hearing patient and carer feedback, including amongst those for whom it can be more difficult to give feedback in traditional ways, for example people with low literacy levels or low levels of English.

The Committee has also written to Trust regarding its concerns on cancelled routine cancer operations, and the accessibility of the neurology service. The Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee met with Trust to discuss the reasons behind the cancellation of some routine cancer operations and believes it is imperative that the Trust continues to work with system partners to mitigate these risks as far as possible – particularly timely and efficient discharge. The Committee remains concerned at the increasing number of referrals declined by the neurology service. Whilst it understands the pressures the Department is facing, it believes it must be a priority for the Trust to ensure access to the neurology service for citizens who need it.

During 2021/22, the Committee has taken a range of steps to try and understand the circumstances, encourage and support improvement and hold the Trust to account for the quality and safety of services. To support it in undertaking this role, and to enable citizens to have the necessary assurance and confidence in the services they are receiving, the Committee encourages the Trust to take an open and honest approach when things haven't gone well and in relation to areas for improvement. It welcomes the commitment in the Quality Account to openness and honesty about patient safety incidents but was surprised that in the draft Quality Account document it saw there was no mention of the Prevention of Future Death Notices relevant to the Trust that had been issued over the last year. The Committee notes the significant increase in Serious Incidents reported and will be interested to review this data benchmarked against other similar Trusts to see whether this is reflective of an improving safety culture, which it hopes is the case.

Finally, the Committee would like to thank all staff at the Trust who have worked on the frontline throughout an incredibly difficult year. Despite the areas of concern raised in the Care Quality Commission's report on maternity services in 2020, the Committee recognises the Trust was rated as 'outstanding' in the Caring domain despite the clear pressure that frontline staff had been under.