Improving productivity in NHS estates and facilities management

The NHS is facing continual pressure with increasing demands on its resources including an ageing population, technological advances and further calls for on-going efficiency savings. With growing media and public attention in relation to quality of patient care (including recent high profile CQC activity), increasingly, there is a requirement to balance calls for improvements in productivity against maintaining the highest possible standards of facilities management and ultimately patient care.

In 2009 the NHS announced that in response to the economic downturn and the increasing demands on healthcare, it would need to deliver between fifteen and twenty billion pounds worth of efficiency savings per year by 2013-14. With around 40 per cent of these savings expected to come from increased efficiency in hospitals, the Kings Fund[1.] estimated that this would require year-on-year productivity gains of around 6%.

The 2012 Nuffield Trust report `*Can NHS hospitals do more with less?*' states that such saving levels can only be achieved through hospitals making significant improvements in productivity and efficiency and the identification of opportunities to `*enhance outcomes and reduce costs by speeding up the adoption of affordable new technologies.*'

Other recent Department of Health initiatives have sought to offer guidance. The QIPP (Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention) Challenge is a large scale transformational programme covering all areas of the NHS including clinical functions, facilities management and patient care. Its aim is to enable large scale efficiency savings for reinvestment into the provision of quality driven frontline care.

Such initiatives need to be applied `*consistently and comprehensively*' in order for them to be fully effective with no negative impact on the quality of care. While the main focus of larger scale cost saving initiatives is clinical improvements (directly correlating to patient quality of care), the estates and facilities function underpins all clinical activity, and as such can make a vital contribution to productivity improvements.

Practical routes to productivity improvements in estates and facilities management

NHS trusts are looking for ways to realise the aspirations of such initiatives at a practical level. It has been widely accepted that significant advances can be made through changes in hospital estates and facilities management processes.

Delivering quality and productivity improvements are paramount and as such require the appropriate application of innovation and technology. In response to this demand, these same government initiatives are being closely followed by a number of niche NHS specialist software companies who are working to give back control to facilities managers. Significant advances in CAFM software development now provide a range of data solutions with automated processes and reporting capability developed specifically to support productivity improvements.

Meeting the productivity challenge

The fmfirst® product suite developed by Asckey Data Services Ltd has been developed specifically for and in liaison with NHS Trust managers. This range of linked modules including fmfirst®-estates and facilities and fmfirst®-cleaning, fully incorporate both the practical day-to-day management tasks and the legislative obligations faced by estates and facilities managers today.

Critical operational functionality has been developed in-line with the ever changing NHS environment. fmfirst® has been designed to support estates and facilities managers in meeting productivity objectives and regulatory audit standards. Intuitive work flows, simplified windows based functionality plus a full audit trail tracks how, by whom and when tasks were completed - providing the long-term traceability for effective audit provision.

Doing more with less

Productivity improvements can be realised not only in terms of system enhancements but also in terms of staff efficiency -`*doing more with less*'. NHS trusts are taking on the challenge, implementing major operational changes to maximise productivity including the introduction of external NHS IT support specialists. Playing a vital role in the implementation of such initiatives, recent technological advances offer tailored system solutions designed to:

- Measurably improve the quality of FM services through streamlined automation
- Integrate key functionality - streamline cross-site functions for reduced operational costs
- Provide a paperless solution – towards paperless solution by 2018 (Jeremy Hunt)
- Control costs – manage overall operational expenditure to prevent overspend
- Provide full visibility of critical performance information for improved communication

In addition:

- Simplify reporting mechanisms - transforming FM data into meaningful information to support management decision making
- Identify trends and provide advance warning of potentially costly service failures
- Ensure compliance with legal, corporate and legislative best practice

- Manages risk - provides a full audit trail in-line with current regulatory standards
- Improved staff mobilisation – enables remote working with Mobile functionality (eg. cleaning audit management tool)
- Support service continuity - remote IT support teams free up internal resource

Interlinked functionality creates unlimited potential for further productivity improvements. With this collective strength and flexibility, trusts can build powerful, customised systems for improved efficiency creating a fully linked audit trail connecting previously separate areas of facilities management. fmfirst® supports the implementation of `leaner', more productive ways of working in areas of the hospital estate back office functions.   Practical examples include:

- IT Systems integration and external support
- Cleaning audit management software
- Estates and facilities management software
- Mobile technology
- Stock control management and waste reduction

Provision of a clean and safe environment

Within non-clinical functions, the over-riding objective is quality of the care environment and the provision of a `clean and safe environment'. The fmfirst®-product suite supports the implementation of CQC outcomes as follows:

fmfirst®-cleaning (audit management tool) - Outcome 8 - `Cleanliness and infection control management'. This new cleaning audit management tool can be used in the implementation of eg. risk assessment, task scheduling, scheduled audits and cleaning intensities with a full audit function providing essential long-term traceability and evidence of the provision of a `clean and appropriate environment for the prevention and control of infection'.

fmfirst®-estates and facilities - Outcome 10 - `Safety and suitability of premises'.  This module supports essential FM tasks including planned maintenance and asset management, risk assessment, implementation of remedial actions and hazards notification. Functionality covers the requirement for trusts to take into account `any relevant design, technical and operational standards and manage all risks in relation to the premises'. Reporting functionality forms the basis for the provision of evidence across a number of required legislative outcomes and can be adapted as required.

With a direct connection between quality and efficiency, a focus on '*doing things right first time*' can avoid adverse events can ultimately save costs in key areas eg. the control of hospital acquired infections.

Mobilising resources for improved performance

Trusts are making increasing use of handheld technology to facilitate remote working. With the potential for dramatic productivity improvements, engineering and trade staff productivity can be further enhanced using Mobile Task Management functionality. MTM gives NHS Estates and Facilities staff full flexibility with the ability to receive details of a task wherever they are throughout the estate without the need to carry paper tickets or seek the use of a PC terminal. Service Level Agreement (SLA) targets can be attained by allowing technicians to receive complete information and instructions remotely and in real-time.

Asset Condition Surveys are much more efficient when carried out with mobile devices. These allow for direct, live data entry, eliminating the need to prepare manual check lists. Information captured at source reduces error rates and with powerful, lightweight portable devices paperwork is dramatically reduced or even eliminated.

With the targeted application of specialist facilities management software, trusts can effectively monitor overall performance against core objectives. Such systems empower the NHS workforce from remote workers to trust managers; producing accurate, reliable, measurable data that can make a significant bottom-line contribution.

[1.] The King's Fund is a charitable foundation in England.