

## **Dr Peter Samuel puts the *Scottish* cat amongst the *Lansley* pigeons**

The NHS in England may be in turmoil, but a major new academic study claims its Scottish equivalent should serve as a role model for the public sector.

According to the findings of a two-year report, post-devolution healthcare in Scotland represents a “ground-breaking” approach to the art of industrial relations.

Scotland has taken “arguably the most ambitious labour-management partnership so far attempted in the UK public sector” and made it work.

Academics from Nottingham University Business School studied the workings of NHS Scotland in an effort to enhance understanding of partnership agreements.

In recent years such arrangements have come to cover around a third of all public sector employees across Britain, some 1.5m of them working in the NHS.

After devolution the NHS in England increased its reliance on a market-based approach – now one of the various controversies surrounding its future direction.

By contrast, NHS Scotland set about developing partnership agreements at national and board level as part of a strategy to engage staff in improving services.

Nottingham University Business School is an acknowledged leader in teaching and research in the fields of sustainability, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

“Anyone wanting to understand how government, employers and staff should work together to deal with strategic and organisational challenges can learn from it.”

Dr Peter Samuel carried out the study with Professor Nick Bacon, a fellow expert in human resources management, with the full co-operation of NHS Scotland officials. Dr Samuel said : “Although partnerships are found elsewhere in the public sector, NHS Scotland’s stands out as distinct and novel. It has survived for over a decade, defying reorganisation and changes in administrations, and it can offer valuable lessons in how to improve industrial relations.

The study examined the frequency, scope, behaviour and “voice” of meetings involving various forums associated with NHS Scotland’s partnership agreements.

Chief among these were the Scottish Workforce and Staff Governance Committee (SWAG) and the Scottish Partnership Forum and Secretariat (SPF).

As well as attending many forums in person, researchers painstakingly analysed the published minutes from scores of meetings held between 1999 and 2009.

The study praises the way NHS Scotland separates broad-ranging debates over strategic issues from detailed discussions over specific workplace policies. It also highlights the lack of repetition — the SPF addressed more than 133 topics in a decade — and the near-absence of a “We’ve heard all this before” mentality.

“The policymakers of NHS Scotland clearly concluded the only way to deliver better healthcare was to improve the way staff were engaged. This led to the establishment of various structures at national and local levels to give staff more say in decisions affecting their working lives and healthcare provision.”

“NHS Scotland has even passed into law a ‘staff governance code’ that compels all its health boards to engage and involve staff and their representatives. “This innovation in industrial relations is arguably one of the biggest examples of industrial democracy to be found anywhere in the world – and they have made it work.”

“Our research suggests NHS Scotland is well placed to cope with the harsh realities of any future squeeze on the public purse. NHS Scotland has a mutual commitment to improving patient care and staff involvement, with everyone sharing an incredible common agenda.”

“On the other hand, the future for industrial relations in public sector organisations that choose to pursue purely market-based reforms might prove stormy and are likely to destroy any remaining confidence in those politicians who strenuously ignore evidence based information”.

**“But it’s still not too late for public service managers (including the Department of Health) and staff representatives to start building a meaningful dialogue around improvement, rather than downsizing or asking the private sector to help.”**

*Lansley: Are you listening?*

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