

SOMERSET HEALTH INFORMATICS SERVICE



SOMERSET HEALTH INFORMATICS SERVICE SEEKS CURE FOR REPORTING HEADACHE

THE BACKGROUND

The NHS's founding father, Nye Bevan, famously stated in 1948 that central control over the organisation would be so tight that the sound of every dropped bedpan would 'reverberate around the corridors of Whitehall'.

Given the immense size of the NHS—it employs some 1.5 million people and has an annual budget of £40 billion—such tight central control was never going to be practical. This has been belatedly recognised by the current Labour Government—which has made decentralisation of power a central tenet of its NHS plan.

The plan makes it clear that whilst Whitehall will set ambitious performance targets, responsibility for their execution will be devolved to managers and staff at the local level. NHS Trusts that perform well for patients will be rewarded with increased freedom and financial autonomy to run their own affairs.

One of the first structural changes to improve management at the local level was to create Primary Care Trusts (PCTs). These combine primary and community care services and give local health professionals more freedom to develop and commission new services. At the same time, NHS Trusts were maintained, but competition was replaced with co-operation between Acute Care Trusts (ACTs) and PCTs.

The Government also disbanded just under 100 District Health Authorities and replaced them with 28 Strategic Health Authorities to assess needs across the board.

Somerset Health Informatics typifies the new era of co-operation ushered in by the Government's NHS plan. The county-wide shared service organisation, created 18

months ago, provides Information Management and Technology (IM&T) support to two Acute Care Trusts (ACTs), four Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and one Mental Health & Social Care Trust (MHT). Part of the role of Somerset Health Informatics is to collate, process and deliver data relating to clinical performance, including waiting times for all NHS organisations in Somerset. This underpins a unified approach to managing clinical care and delivering NHS Plan targets.

THE CHALLENGE

In order to meet strict targets for reducing waiting times, managers required instant access to all relevant data. Only armed with this information, would it be possible to optimally deploy available resources and pre-empt potential performance issues.

The challenge was to centrally collate data that might affect waiting times within NHS organisations, both at the PCT and ACT levels, and present it back to managers in a timely, and easy to digest, format.

This included developing an early warning system to identify potential

long-wait patients, so they could be offered appropriate services to ensure all patients were treated within waiting list targets.

The system had to be easy-to-use and the data needed to be updated centrally to ensure everyone was making decisions based on the same information.



THE NEXT LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE™

It was also necessary to reduce the time spent on producing routine monthly reports on waiting times for the external agencies such as the Department of Health and the Strategic Health Authority. Each report took an average of 10-15 man hours for the Information Analysts to produce—a hugely bureaucratic and time-consuming process.

THE SOLUTION

Somerset Health Informatics decided that a major investment in Business Intelligence software would be necessary, supported by client NHS organisations. It appointed Cognos partner, Bidetime, to assist in the implementation of its analysis and reporting technology. Somerset Health Informatics bought a total of 200 Cognos PowerPlay and Impromptu Web and desktop licences.

Cognos' PowerPlay software is an online analytical processing solution that enables users to explore large volumes of data with the potential to deliver sub-second response times in a Web, Windows, or Excel environment.

Impromptu allows users to create reports drawn from any data source and deliver them to managers across the Internet. Users can subscribe to reports, and then customise them to meet their specific needs. This has the added benefit of each user only requiring Internet Explorer. Given that every NHS manager now has access to a fast Internet connection, this will make it easy to roll-out.

Somerset Health Informatics, in collaboration with Bidetime, has now completed the first phase of the project involving a total of 50 staff including operational managers, Somerset Health Informatics staff and a Trust chief executive. Many of the staff involved have a direct responsibility for managing Trust waiting lists.

THE RESULTS

“The software has produced immediate results by slashing the time taken to produce monthly reports from anything up to 15 hours, to just a few minutes. This has freed my team to spend a greater proportion of their time on actually analysing and acting on performance data—rather than collating it. It also

means we are able to manage additional reporting demands arising from within and outside the NHS without having to draft in extra resources,” said Neil Stevens, Head of Somerset Health Informatics.

“It is also now possible to spot potential problems before they arise. For example, managers from across the county can collaborate to prioritise care for ‘long wait’ patients. In the past, the lack of a centralised data processing centre made this impossible. Somerset Health Informatics’ early warning system, powered by Cognos’ technology, effectively underpins the principle of co-operation enshrined in the Government’s NHS Plan, and the creation of the Somerset Health Informatics Service”, added Stevens.

FUTURE PLANS

“Once all the 200 licences have been rolled-out, all management staff within Trusts and PCTs in Somerset will be able to access performance data instantly via a Web browser,” said Ced Bufton at Bidetime.

“Currently, the Somerset Health Informatics Service is inundated by requests from PCTs for data relating to services that they have commissioned from the ACTs. Once the Web-based interface is up and running, it will be possible for PCT clinicians and managers to drill down to see which staff are responsible for providing the clinical care of individual patients at the ACTs. It will also allow them to run performance reports to get a view on which Trusts are most appropriate for specific treatments,” said Neil Stevens.

WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNT?:

- Cognos’ technology has helped reduce the time taken to produce monthly reports from anything up to 15 hours to a few minutes
- Business Intelligence software frees staff to concentrate on analysing and acting on performance data, rather than collating it
- The early warning system for issues relating to waiting times underpins the principle co-operation between ACTs and PCTs.



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