Background and progress to date

The NHS relies on flexible working staff in order to deliver a quality and cost-efficient service to patients. Especially during a time of organisational change, in order to maintain services local healthcare organisations need access to high-quality, reliable and well-governed flexible options for clinical staff. In a similar way to the out of hours service, however, there has been considerable adverse publicity given to flexible working, and there is poor differentiation between the different providers of flexible working. The new national compliance scheme, changes in the market including privately run NHS hospitals and the partial clarification of governance responsibilities between the boards of the providers of flexible workers, healthcare provider organisations, those commissioning healthcare services and indeed the flexible worker themselves are starting to be clarified and provide both threats and opportunities to the size of the flexible worker market.

A recent Audit Commission Guide (‘Making the most of frontline staff, 2010) highlights the variance in use of temporary staff: ‘the proportion of temporary nursing staff costs to total nursing staff costs varies from 1 to 28%. And ‘Providing that NHS professional or bank nurses are properly managed so that they keep their skills up to date and work on familiar wards, quality should remain high and they can add flexibility to staff management’

Our final report

- Describes and defines flexible working and flexible workers
- Explains the main quality concerns, and how they should be addressed
- Describes the various governance issues, responsibilities and accountabilities for
  - Flexible workers themselves
  - Organisations providing flexible working
  - Healthcare providers using flexible workers
  - Those commissioning healthcare services that use flexible workers
- Makes recommendations for further development of the governance flexible workforce in such a way as to contribute to enhancing the reputation of that sector

Method and approach involved:

- Quality perspectives from those involved in using and providing flexible working
- Research into the perceived governance and quality failings surrounding flexible working
- Better practice information in regard to flexible working
- An understanding of the law and required compliances guiding flexible working
- The processes a good provider of flexible working uses in order to meet compliances, and institute better practice thinking
- Views on recommended better practice at all levels for the good governance of flexible working

The approach to gathering this was to conduct a series of interviews with colleagues in the field, undertake desk research, and spend time with NHS Professionals to appreciate the governance and quality processes NHS Professionals has in place.

Findings

- There is very mixed appreciation of the governance issues for flexible working within the market. In particular, non-executive directors of organisations using flexible workers rarely receive assurance or value for money reports, and poorly understand the issues. At present the issue is tackled at too low a level. If at all
- More worryingly, those executive directors responsible within the market still retains and out of date maintain an out of date picture of the issues, and the value offering of NHS Professionals
- Existing compliances are poorly applied, and healthcare providers are naïve to their own responsibilities
- Consideration of this issue is almost entirely absent from commissioner boards
- Boards frequently assume that flexible workforce solutions are always ‘second best’, and costly, and do not value flexible working as an essential part of a quality, value for money and indeed essential service for their patients
- The idea that a provider of flexible working might well have better systems – Those commissioning healthcare services that use flexible workers
- That the better practice compliance regime of NHS Professionals is better understood
- A higher level of awareness by healthcare providers and commissioners, leading to flexible working being valued and understood
- Enhancing the role of the audit committee to ensure that where flexible workers are deployed, this is done from a reliably governed provider of flexible workers
- That the better practice compliance regime of NHS Professionals is better understood
- Boards discuss their level of risk from flexible working in an informed way
- Boards are empowered to ensure that more discerning procurement of flexible working is in place
- Internal Audit are encouraged to undertake a review of compliance for both flexible and permanent staff

The main recommendations to be included in the guidance being developed include:

- Report covering the above
- Maturity Matrix: describing graduated better practice in a maturity matrix format
- Board assurance prompt to provide the board of providers with the key assurance concepts
- A bookmark summarising the key points could also be made available

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