

Talk about:

Tweaking the contract

nhs managers exclusive

According to the latest data, the English NHS ended its financial year within the main 18-weeks target (that's the "incomplete pathways" one).

This success was powered by two national interventions: a dollop of cash to hold back the swelling waiting list, and an amnesty on the perverse targets which push short-waiting patients to the front of the queue (the "adjusted admitted" and "non-admitted" targets).

Then everything changed.

Now there is no more money, so the waiting list can be expected to resume the rapid growth of recent years.

A growing queue means growing waits, indefinitely. So if the waiting list carries on growing we will eventually reach six months, then a year, and then longer, and no amount of clever scheduling can stop it.

Talking of scheduling, that's worse too. The perverse targets are back, and this time they're mandatory. Patients are once again being booked out of order, and that pushes up waiting times.

Even if the perverse targets were abolished (which they should be), a growing waiting list would overwhelm everything unless it is also sorted out.

Until all of that happens, the only way to avoid being caught up in an endless cycle of sanctions and regulatory failure is to control the size of your local waiting lists, in every specialty and subspecialty that you manage. And I mean the size of the whole waiting list, not just the number of breaches.

That may require "overperforming" against the contract, and unfortunately the processes around this can be rather heavy going. But there is something you could do now to make the rules more predictable.

The Trust and CCG can agree how small each waiting list needs to be for all the targets to be sustainable, if urgent patients are treated quickly and routine patients broadly wait their turn.

If those sustainable list sizes are worked out now, then it is clear in advance when over-performance against the contract will be justified. And operational managers will have a simple measure that helps them plan for the foreseeable, and adapt more quickly as things change.

Who knows: perhaps the sustainable list size might one day join activity as a standard line item in the contract?



Comment from Rob Findlay at Gooroo
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Read Rob's analysis of the 18-week stats at hsj.co.uk/comment and blog.gooroo.co.uk

Hi

Contact Gooroo
>> gooroo.co.uk
>> info@gooroo.co.uk
>> 01743 232149



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