



NHS England tackles the complex problem of Nutrition and Hydration



Client background

NHS England oversees the budget, planning, delivery and operation of the NHS, with the aim to “improve the health outcomes for people in England”. NHS England was formed in April 2013 as a result of the Health & Social Care Act 2012 reform and incorporates the functions of the earlier National Patient Safety Agency.

Client challenge

Ensuring adequate nutrition and hydration across the health service, and related care service system, is a significant and longstanding challenge. It remains a serious and high profile patient safety concern. Previous initiatives and efforts, by many different people and organisations, have succeeded in raising awareness for a short time. None have achieved sustainable change. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) report that 20% of organisations are not meeting the required standard.

The provision of nutrition and hydration in the care system is very complex, involving many stakeholders and there are many difficulties preventing it from being delivered successfully. NHS England recognised the need to take a new approach to what may be classified as a ‘wicked problem’. Catalyze were engaged to help them explore the complex, interconnecting issues, and work towards finding a long-lasting solution.

How Catalyze helped

Catalyze worked with the Patient Safety Lead at NHS England to define a ‘trigger question’: *“What are the key issues, barriers and challenges we face in reducing malnutrition and dehydration across our health economy?”*

We have helped NHS England:

- Develop a shared understanding of the key issues
- See how the challenges interconnect
- Agree three root problems that need to be addressed

“This process has enabled us to have a clear vision which in turn allows us to articulate what action is required across the system to make reliable and sustainable improvements both in the quality and safety of nutritional care.”

Caroline Lecko,
Patient Safety Lead,
NHS England

The ‘trigger question’ approach is used as part of the Synplex process to uncover a broad range of issues relating to a given problem. Key stakeholders were identified and engaged in the process, ensuring those responsible for providing nutrition and hydration in the care service system were represented. The trigger question was distributed to this diverse set of stakeholders, and a total of 183 answers were received.

The responses to the trigger question were explored through two workshops, facilitated by Catalyze. Initially just a few of the issues were selected, and participants were asked to perform a series of pairwise comparisons, asking “does issue A have a direct and significant negative effect on issue B?” In making these comparisons, information and perspectives were shared amongst the group. The transparent approach ensured implicit assumptions were revealed and any misunderstandings resolved. Crucially, a common language was established.

At the start of the workshops, many people felt the task was too complex and insurmountable; the volume and variety of responses to the trigger question was overwhelming. However, the incremental process, gradually adding elements, broke the problem down into manageable pieces. The process was supported by a software model that stores connections between elements and builds an ‘Influence Map’. As further issues were selected and compared, the influence map evolved to show how the issues interrelate. The group felt the final Influence Map covered all of the issues raised.

The results highlighted that multiple barriers are involved in solving the problem of nutrition and hydration. They will all need to be addressed in some way. However, many of the issues can be seen as symptomatic of others. The process identified three ‘root’ obstacles which must be resolved or mitigated, showing where efforts must be focused.

Enabling Effective Decisions

By using the Synplex process and facilitated discussions, NHS England was able to:

- gain a better understanding from a diverse and informed set of stakeholders of the range of issues that must be faced when tackling poor nutrition and dehydration;
- discover the relationships between the challenges faced in providing adequate nutrition and hydration; and
- identify three root problems where focussed effort needs to be applied.

By the end of the process, all participants:

- had a better idea of what each other did and how their roles fit together;
- agreed on what the overriding issues were; and
- committed to work with NHS England to tackle the problems.

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At Catalyze we help organisations create and execute decision-making processes which focus on the best possible outcome; engaging people, breaking down barriers, creating understanding of different perspectives, and making best use of resources.

Catalyze was founded in 2001 in conjunction with the London School of Economics and Political Science, applying techniques built on robust and validated decision theory. We support global clients from offices in the UK, USA and New Zealand.