In May 2008 the primary care commissioning team at NHS East Lancashire started a project to raise standards in general practice. The project used a balanced scorecard, which became known as the practice development framework. This tool, developed with the cooperation of the practices and the active participation of practice managers during 2008/09, has provided local GPs with the means to manage local quality issues, monitor standards and set improvement goals.

**Project goals**

Key objectives were to:

- Provide practices with a learning and development tool to enable continuous quality improvement in primary care, driving up standards and helping to eradicate inequalities

- Provide individual GP practices with a practice portfolio which details achievement against a number of contractual and other standards, identifying the development needs of the practice and supporting a practice development plan

- Instil greater clarity and consensus within GP practices concerning primary care standards and to provide unambiguous feedback on progress towards achievement of those standards

- Provide reliable information to reassure the PCT board that national and local directives are being implemented effectively and efficiently in primary care and are having the impact they expect

- Strengthen existing management processes, making them more focused on achieving and maintaining improvements in primary care

- Formalise the use of contractual sanctions as a last resort where supportive mechanisms fail to produce significant improvement

- Facilitate the identification of underperforming or struggling practices and promote a pro-active approach to recovery.
**Project management**

The primary care commissioning team worked with practices via the local practice managers’ forum to consider the underpinning principles and approach to the project recognising the need to work in partnership with practices in order to maximise the project’s effectiveness. The LMC was also consulted.

**Principles and approach**

- A supportive two-way process focused on practice development
- To provide a learning and development tool enabling continuous quality improvement, driving up standards and ironing out inequalities
- To collect in one framework standards and indicators relevant to primary medical care
- Expansion of the existing practice review visiting cycle (QOF) to include other elements relevant to primary medical care
- Use of existing data sources
- Re-structure of the existing QOF steering group into a PDF steering group

**Measurable impact**

The practice development framework project has linked into a number of other projects currently being undertaken across the PCT including:

**Saving a Million Years of Life** – this is East Lancs’ response to stopping people dying before their time. The campaign is to tackle social and deprivation problems which lead to premature death throughout the area.

Clinical areas of the QOF for inclusion in this year’s round of practice review visits were agreed with public health for their potential impact on reducing health inequalities.

A visit from the national health inequalities team provided the PCT with recommendations for reducing health inequalities, which have been fed back to practices.

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**Valuable outcomes**

The practice development framework is far more than just a balanced scorecard for general practice. During the development review visiting process, the visiting teams met regularly to discuss their experiences. What they often found was that it was difficult to define exactly what it was that made a good general practice. Outcome measures for quality, access, and patient experience are important but don’t provide the full picture.

Case studies of the practice development review visits will be reviewed to distil the success factors for general practice, which can be applied to the development of general practice across East Lancashire.

During the review visiting process practices where asked to consider their current and future development and support needs both in terms of statutory requirements and more subjective needs – what they felt was important to their practice. A number of practices expressed an interest in undertaking the Royal College of General Practitioners’ Quality Practice award, but felt the cost was prohibitive. The PCT executive has been asked to consider supporting practices wishing to attempt the award. A number of practices have also undertaken the Investors in People award and have found this to be a valuable experience for the whole practice team.

**Sustainability and spread**

Each practice-based commissioning locality agreed to commit a proportion of its resources (the 2008/09 incentive scheme) to support the practice development framework process. This encouraged practices to devote proportionate effort to the scheme. The PCT is now planning to develop a similar framework for dental practices.

**Barriers**

- Time to develop the initial scorecard
- Time to visit the practices
- Time for practices to develop and improve
- Being clear on the initial scope and objectives of the project – the primary care commissioning team were asked on occasion to change the original specification of the project plan to meet other objectives within the PCT.

**Enablers**
- Board sign up
- Buy in from clinicians and the LMC
- Supportive and developmental process
- PBC funds were set aside to support the implementation
- Protected learning time

**Lessons learned**
- The need to be clear about the objectives at the outset of the project and stick to them
- The scorecard needs to be dynamic – indicators and achievement thresholds need to be revised once a certain level is reached across all practices to ensure continued development
- There must be arrangements to assist practices identified as requiring support
- Do not assume a direct correlation between cost and quality – high cost does not always mean high quality and low cost does not necessarily mean low quality.

**Resources to share**
Download the practice development framework.

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