



in employee investigations

100 Conversations: Velindre University NHS Trust, NHS Wales

The Velindre University NHS Trust is a specialist provider of cancer services in Wales and also runs the Welsh Blood Service.

Amanda Jenkins, Acting Assistant Director of Workforce at the Trust, was keen for her team to take part in HPMA's 100 Conversations, because it built on work they are already undertaking to improve their employee investigations.

Back in October 2021, Amanda started mapping their investigation, disciplinary and grievance processes. "I come from the private sector and was used to a speedy investigation process. When I joined the NHS, it was quite a shock to see just how long employee investigations can take," said Amanda. "Whilst they can't be rushed, the timescales seemed excessive in a lot of cases."

The team later got involved in the 'avoidable employee harm' programme, developed by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and Health Education and Improvement Wales and which was being offered to NHS Wales organisations. Since then, the HR team has collated data, secured the support of the executive board and is delivering an avoidable harm action plan in relation to employee investigations. Already they have reduced timeframes, case complexity, sickness absence and costs.



Amanda talked us through the team's initial journey and where being part of the 100 Conversations takes them next.

1. Gathering data, measuring gains

"We started by looking at the number of formal investigations we were doing and how long they were taking – then we started looking at costs, in terms of sickness absence. We now produce an annual employee relations report which shows measurable outcomes and next steps. The number of formal investigations we run has more than halved year-on-year, replaced by early, informal measures. And we've saved £600k in sickness absence directly related to disciplinary investigations.

2. Mapping processes

“We took a deep dive into our investigation, disciplinary and grievance processes, asking lots of questions about whether or not we were taking the right steps. It was a good place to start, as we started to see why things were taking so long. We were then able to focus on where the issues and hold-ups were, and what we could do about them.”

3. Getting leaders on board

“We took the data to our executive board. We reassured them that avoidable employee harm is not about stopping formal investigations. It’s about doing the right thing, at the right time, which would mean that not everyone needs to be taken through a formal process.

“The avoiding employee harm approach clearly needs to be owned by the leaders of the organisation for it to be adopted. Bringing data and ideas on the actions we were planning, provided our senior leaders with what they needed, so they could agree and own the approach.

“We also presented some case studies and invited a contact who had become a TU rep, because of how they had been treated through an investigation. They talked about their experience, which was particularly powerful.”

4. Taking action to reduce the time investigations take

“One of our first initiatives was to establish a dedicated bank of experienced, trained investigating officers (IOs). This means that no-one is taken away from their day-job and we now have a bank of IOs that we can call on, as and when we need them. This has been cost-effective and reduced the time investigations take.

“The IOs are typically ex-solicitors, ex-nurses, ex-executives and ex-HR officers – it’s flexible for them, and for us, and ensures we’re not losing valuable skills and experience from colleagues who may have retired. The executive board signed off a bank of two professionals initially. We are at now eight, with other health organisations also tapping into this resource. We have also introduced a system to classify cases according to their complexity, which means we are often able to intervene and resolve things earlier.”

5. Looking after our ‘own’

“Traditionally in the NHS, following the disciplinary process has been the only way – it’s been trained and engrained.

“Now, with the HPMA’s Avoiding Harm programme, our HR professionals are able to talk to peers who are also on a journey, which can sometimes feel uncomfortable at times. It’s reassuring to see that other organisations and colleagues are wrestling with this same

issues, but are also making progress too! It's great to be part of a movement that champions an avoidable employee harm approach.

"There have also been development opportunities for our HR colleagues – as we've provided our team with mediation and coaching training to support managers. Previously, our HR advisors were expected to simply be an expert on the policy and inform managers on the process. Now their role is to support managers to reach the best outcome for the person, the team and the organisation.

"We now have specific decompression sessions with our staff psychologist around the more complex employee investigations cases. As well as supporting their wellbeing, it acts as professional supervision for HR colleagues. Staff also have the option to speak to our psychologist on a one-to-one basis, as employee investigations can take their toll."

"After all, reducing harm is how we treat our patients, and it's how we should treat our staff, too."

6. Equipping, supporting and empowering managers through the change

"The biggest change has been for our line managers who have needed to become comfortable with making decisions, rather than just following a defined process. I appreciate that this demands more of them. They are now asked questions like: 'What do you think we should we do?' and 'Do the issues being presented, mean we have to take this person through a formal process, or can you start with just a conversation?'

"We have introduced Fundamentals of Management training. We already have leadership training in place, but this equips our clinicians with the basic management skills they need when they are given people management responsibilities.

"We have applied the avoidable employee harm principles to the grievance process, too, and have seen a reduction in the number of formal grievances being raised. We did this by adding an element to the monthly conversations that every HR business partner has with operational managers. So, alongside workforce planning etc, comes a conversation around issues within the teams - anything that is bubbling up - so that it can be nipped in the bud and dealt with, before it gets to the point where a grievance is lodged."

100 Conversations and the next steps: diversity and embedding the avoiding harm approach

"We've decided to start looking at diversity and consider if there are specific groups of people who may be more impacted by our processes than others. We'll analyse and collate the data and consider its implications across our People and OD function.

"We want to adopt a compassionate, reducing harm approach in all of our employee relations, not just in the investigations space. We're on a journey to take it right across the People and OD function. We will begin using the same principles to manage our sickness absence, workforce planning, recruitment and retention and so on."

You too can take part in ‘100 Conversations’

We are encouraging HPMA members to start a conversation in their organisations using the *When we do harm* discussion paper.

Let us know who you had the conversation with (board, executive team, HR colleagues), how it went and what steps you are taking to improve employee investigations where you work?

When you’ve had your conversation, use this online form to let us know how it’s gone <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/6TRZY3R> and we’ll send you further resources to support your ongoing work in this area.

To download your copy of the *When we do harm* paper, visit: www.hpma.org.uk/avoiding-harm today

Velindre University NHS Trust, NHS Wales – the outcome of their conversation

Key reflections

1. We’ve made significant progress on the investigations front, but this can be applied throughout the employee relations and organisational development space.
2. Data is key – collect what you can to start and build data collection into the changes you make.
3. Avoiding Harm shifts the emphasis on what we as HR professionals do: it moves from simply informing managers on the investigation process requirements to preparing, equipping, coaching and supporting line managers to proactively manage resolution.

Key actions

1. To look at investigations through a specific diversity lens and assess their impact on certain groups and whether it is proportionate.
2. To assess the impact of adopting an avoidable employee harm approach on the outcomes of investigations.
3. To continue to focus on developing and supporting the skills of our managers.

