

TOWARDS EXCELLENCE ACCREDITATION ASSESSMENT

CHANGING TIMES FOR THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Having recently been through a Future Focused Finance (FFF) online Level 2 assessment process, as an assessor and being assessed, I wanted to share some thoughts when comparing this to the traditional assessment process of site visits. Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic during the last 12 months has resulted in us all having to work in new ways and the FFF assessment process is no different.

Under both methods the process is still the same format, consisting of the following steps:

- Review of the application form and initial evidence gathering
- Clarification meeting to discuss the evidence and highlight any possible gaps
- Meeting with the CFO
- Staff meetings to engage with approximately 20% of the staff in the department
- Attendance at a finance team meeting
- Submission of the final report/recommendation to the Finance Leadership Council

In the summer of 2019, I was invited to lead on the Level 2 assessment of Sherwood Forest NHS Foundation Trust, and this was my first real insight into the accreditation process following the completion of assessor training. This assessment was required in a very short space of time and there was a sense of being “thrown in at the deep end” but it did give me a really good appreciation of the level of engagement required between the assessor and the organisation being reviewed to achieve a successful outcome. In the summer of 2020, I was again asked to lead on an assessment, this time for the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust, but crucially this assessment was planned to take place totally on-line through MS Teams.

Both applications started out with the trusts submitting evidence by email and after a period of review a number of follow up questions were submitted along with requests for further information. Once the assessment team are happy that the evidence available is sufficient, the assessment should commence. This is the point where the two approaches start to differ, and each offered advantages and disadvantages over the other. The on-site assessment requires advanced planning as the aim is to complete the exercise within one working day. This therefore means that the team leading the process within the organisation will need to produce an agenda for the day and will have nominated staff from within the finance team to be part of the group discussions. This approach is quite structured and does rely on all staff being available on the selected day. In comparison, the on-line assessments do offer more flexibility as the interviews and staff meetings may take place on different days to help with availability.

Set out below are some of the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

On-Site Assessment		On-Line Assessment	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Complete in on day	Need a structured agenda in advance	Assessment can be staggered over several days	Lack of personal contact with the wider team
Get to see the department first-hand	Travelling time for the assessors	No travelling time for assessors	Lack of face-to-face contact in group meetings (eg) cameras turned off in Teams meetings
Better face to face engagement in staff meetings		Agenda can be a bit more flexible	Harder to get engagement in the group meetings
Get an opportunity to see the wider Trust			Harder to get a feel for the culture and diversity in the organisation
Better feel for the culture and diversity within the organisation			Technology issues

Having personally experienced both processes the online approach does offer a significant advantage in that the process can be a bit more flexible and this can work to the advantage of the assessors and the organisation being assessed. However, site visits do offer a deeper insight into the operation, culture and diversity of the finance department and the wider trust and it does allow the opportunity for further discussions with staff in the trust who are not formally invited to be part of the assessment process. From experience, it has been invaluable to walk around the trust site with finance staff and see some of the interaction that takes place between finance and non-finance colleagues which is helpful in reinforcing the level of engagement that exists within an organisation and will give a good indication if it is “a great place to work”. Informal conversations with staff on-site are also very useful in gauging how well the FFF “four strengths” are integrated into the culture of the department. Unfortunately, this insight is something that the on-line process struggles to replicate.

The dynamics of the group sessions are also quite different between the two approaches and my personal feeling is that it is a lot more difficult to be fully engaged with the finance team without direct face to face contact. Personal contact is made even more difficult when some members of the group are participating with cameras switched on during MS Teams discussions. This does give a slight sense of disengagement and I would encourage anyone who might be invited to take part in a future assessment to embrace the technology. Engagement is a big part of the assessment process and even in a virtual world it is still nice to be able to see who you are communicating with.

Having also been recently assessed for Level 2 accreditation through an on-line process it does feel as though it adds a different dynamic. The FFF assessment process highlights to a finance department the number of areas of good practice that otherwise go unnoticed and having an assessment team on site is a very good showcase to celebrate these achievements. Leading a team through an on-line process also created a heightened sense that something might not go to plan given the more flexible agenda for the assessment. Fortunately, I had a really supportive and engaged team within BCHC that I could fully rely on although I have to admit that there is always that element of nervousness that someone might overlook to attend one of the group meetings whilst working from home or that the technology might fail. Thankfully for the team at BCHC we had no such issues, and we were able to pull all of the strands together to achieve a successful outcome that reflected the hard work and dedication of the whole finance team within the Trust.

So, for however long the current situation continues, I believe that the FFF accreditation process still has the ability to function in the current climate and in some respects an on-line approach does offer some advantages. However, I do look forward to the days that we can meet up again and carry out on-site assessments as in my view these give a better view of the enthusiasm and engagement within an organisation and provide a stronger insight into the local adoption of the FFF 4 strengths framework.

Stephen Smallwood
Deputy Finance Director
Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

