**Fear of public engagement is holding the NHS back**

26 October, 2016  -- Jane Mordue

With the first of the 44 local sustainability and transformation plans set to be published this week, Jane Mordue, interim chair of Healthwatch England, looks at the importance of involving patients and the public in the big decisions ahead

 It’s no secret that our hospitals, GP surgeries and care homes face big challenges. More of us are living longer, many of us coping with multiple health issues, and the cost of care is rising rapidly.

Yet when professionals and policy makers sit down to talk about how things might be done differently there is often a strong sense of fear that whatever they propose they will face an army of activists campaigning to stop them.

This fear can then translate into people being brought in only at the very end of the process to simply ‘rubber stamp’ over-simplified plans.

Those affected are left with little understanding of the reasons for change, unclear as to how the plans have been put together and feeling ignored.

Understandably this fuels the fires of opposition, but it also means the NHS misses out on a golden opportunity to use feedback to make the right decisions first time.

Ultimately it creates a vicious circle where change is often a slow and needlessly painful process that leaves communities feeling betrayed and creating unnecessary barriers to further change in the future.

**Public engagement is nothing to fear**

Our annual report to Parliament, published last week, sets out what the Healthwatch network has heard from more than half a million patients and members of the public over the last year.

One of the strongest themes that comes through is that people both recognise the current strain on the system and want to do their bit to help.

Patients tell us they are willing to try doing things differently, offering up very practical and pragmatic suggestions on how things can be improved without breaking the bank.

Speaking with patients can also question a whole range of preconceptions in a way that is helpful to health and care professionals, giving valuable evidence and insight into how people really see and use services.

Take, for example, the comments we have gathered from older people that challenge the idea that they might be reluctant to make use of new technology such as skype appointments and online booking. If anything they are often the eager early adopters as the ones with the most to benefit from the increased flexibility in care.

**Breaking the vicious cycle**

It is true to say that the health and social care has been slow to learn some of the valuable lessons of other sectors when it comes to managing change.

However, this week will see the publication of the first of 44 local plans that could fundamentally change the way the NHS works across England.

Some argue that the NHS is already on the back foot with regards public involvement in this latest round of reforms.

But this attitude will not help break the cycle or ensure the NHS makes the right decisions.

It is crucial that early criticism doesn’t result in local decision makers retreating from their duty to talk with the public and missing out on the chance to make the proposals actually fit both the wants and needs of consumers.

NHS England has recognised this and has issued strong new guidance reiterating how important it is that local areas work with their communities to help make the big decisions ahead.

**Time to get involved**

Local Healthwatch across the country are doing their bit, working alongside the voluntary sector to provide the NHS with advice on how to effectively involve communities and to help cut through some of the impenetrable language often used in public consultations.

We are also sharing what we have heard from the hundreds of thousands of conversations we have had with people, providing a foundation of current patient experience and aspirations for the future.

Whilst the focus for now will undoubtedly be on the plans being published throughout the autumn, we also need to start thinking more long term and treating the STPs for what they really are - the latest instalment in a change process that is likely to last many years.

The real prize here is to capitalise on the system’s need for public input to reset the relationship between consumers and the health service and show that working together is the only way forward.

**Jane Mordue is Interim Chair of Healthwatch England**