

NHS Chief Executive's Update

May 2024



Fiona Davies,
Chief Executive NHS Highland

I officially started in the role of Chief Executive of NHS Highland on 1 April 2024 and it has been a busy two months. I would like to thank everyone for their welcome and support. Though I have been part of NHS Highland for almost 12 years, it has been fantastic to continue to connect with more colleagues and get to know more services through my meetings and visits across the area.

Finance

Financial challenges are high on the agenda across the public sector. While our Financial Plan is covered in detail in a later report to this meeting, I must set out the seriousness of the current situation. The pause in capital spending is already well documented, but the position of our revenue budget is yet more significant. We are facing a financial gap of £112 million – 10% of our budget – with brokerage capped at £28.4 million. This leaves us the huge task of finding nearly £84 million in reductions and efficiencies.

Work is already underway to find 3% savings across the board, including reducing our spend on agency and locum staff, making better use of technology to reduce administration costs, and reducing travel. Areas for more targeted redesign work, such as reducing our estate, have also been identified. While we can and will take action that see us maintaining or improving services at reduced cost, there will inevitably also be changes that will have an impact on how and where people access services. I am committed to working with staff and the people who use our services to make such transitions as smooth as possible.

Redesign and resilience

We know that in order to build sustainable health and care services we will need to change the way we do things, while listening to and adapting services to our communities. In remote and rural areas in particular, people can understandably be concerned about being able to access services nearby, including urgent care, social care and dentistry. In April I met staff and community representatives in Skye, Caithness and Lochaber to discuss these issues and some of the innovative solutions being developed, including video links. During my meeting with the community in Skye, the Chair and I confirmed the ongoing commitment of NHS Highland to the completion of the Sir Lewis Ritchie recommendations. I've also been speaking with MSPs about the unique needs of our area and how we can ensure equitable access to services across our large geography, including at recent visit of the Parliamentary Committee for Health, Social Care and Sport to Skye as they looked into remote and rural healthcare.

It is clear that we will need to deliver care differently in the future, and that we need to encourage people to access care appropriately. This will mean working with partners such as the Scottish Ambulance Service, councils and neighbouring boards, as well as asking communities to work with us to design supporting systems, such as transport, befriending, activities, childcare or help with technology. At a recent Community Planning Partnership meeting we explored how the Partnership can most effectively focus efforts to improve people's lives.

We are fortunate in the Highlands and Argyll and Bute to have resilient and engaged communities. As an organisation we need to be equally adaptable in times of change, and we also have a statutory duty to ensure we are prepared for emergencies. At the end of April I attended an emergency planning exercise, 'Exercise Safe Hands'. This brought together territorial health boards, Scottish Ambulance Service, Police Scotland, Health Emergency Preparedness, Resilience, and Response Division (EPRR) and the Scottish Government Resilience Room (SGoRR) to test the plan for a major incident with mass casualties. The exercise scenario was centred in a remote and rural area, recognising that the response in this environment is different to one that takes place in a semi-urban or urban area. This was an extremely useful session, planned by our own Head of Resilience Kate Cochrane, helping us to test procedures and build the relationships which will stand us in good stead in a real emergency.

Staffing

Underpinning all NHS Highland services are our caring and professional teams. Two significant changes relating to staffing came into force on 1 April, and were among topics I discussed at the Area Partnership Forum: the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act and a reduced working week.

The Health and Care (Staffing) Act supports appropriate staffing for quality, safe and effective care. It is not prescriptive in terms of staffing numbers, but asks for evidence to support decision making and risk management. I welcome the Act's promotion of transparency and an open and honest culture, as well as its intent to be supportive rather than punitive. I am confident that the Programme Board and implementation groups we have set up will improve oversight of staffing levels and help us to ensure they are compliant.

The reduction in the working week by 30 minutes for colleagues on Agenda for Change terms and conditions was part of the wider 2023-24 pay deal. This has proved complex to implement, taking into account rotas, the need to ensure services retain their opening hours, and our large number of small teams and single person dependencies. However, teams are working hard to overcome these issues and ensure colleagues can benefit from an improved work-life balance, as intended.

We are always looking for ways to support our teams' wellbeing, so I am pleased that our first Wellbeing Strategy is currently out for consultation. The Wellbeing Strategy supports the physical, mental and financial wellbeing of our colleagues at NHS Highland. It has been developed to capture all the good work already underway while recognising that there are areas to improve upon and develop. It is supported by other pieces of work including the Learning and Development Programme and Communications and Engagement Strategy. I look forward to seeing this good work embedded as we continue our programme of culture change.

And finally...

This month saw both the International Day of the Midwife and International Nurses Day. As a nurse myself, I know first-hand the hard work, professionalism and skill that goes into these roles and would like to thank all nurses and midwives across NHS Highland for their dedication. Our team joined forces with colleagues from NHS Grampian to attend the Royal College of Midwives conference and careers fayre, meeting lots of potential new recruits and singing the praises of living and working in the north of Scotland. This is just one example of the joint working between our two boards, as progress our Maternity Business Case. I'm also delighted to say our warm welcome has been acknowledged with the award of the International Recruitment Pastoral Care Quality Award, recognising the high standard of our support for internationally-recruited staff. Well done to all involved in the recruitment process for these new team members.

Fiona Davies, Chief Executive NHS Highland