Strategic planning in oral health improvement

This article seeks to raise the profile of oral health within the health and social care system, as an important aspect of general health and wellbeing. Patel and Witton aim to highlight the importance of strategic planning in such times of uncertainty and flux, so that organisations are able to clearly articulate their role, remit and priorities, and how they are best placed to deliver upon these.

R Patel
Public Health England South West, Follaton House, Plymouth Road, Totnes TQ9 5NE, UK
Email: patel.reena@phe.gov.uk

R Witton
Peninsula Dental School, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

Corresponding author: Reena Patel, as above

Oral health is an important aspect of general health and wellbeing. Following the abolition of Public Health England (PHE), it is fundamental that oral health improvement remains embedded across the health and social care system. Emerging Integrated Care Systems (ICSS) will also offer opportunities to integrate dental services and oral health promotion activities to support the broader healthcare commissioning agenda. This article highlights tools and processes to support system partners in informing the development of their strategic plans so that they are able to adapt to the changing and increasingly challenging demands of the health and social care sector while maximising opportunities to include oral health in their health improvement strategies.

THE ABOLITION OF PHE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ORAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENT

In August 2020, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced that PHE was being abolished.1 The new Office for Health Promotion will now be leading on national efforts to improve population health, alongside the UK Health Security Agency delivering public health protection functions.2 There have been ongoing concerns about how these plans will address health inequalities.3,4

For oral health improvement in particular, PHE is the principal source of dental public health expertise and its abolition could potentially impact system progress in improving population oral health and reducing oral health inequalities.

CURRENT SYSTEM CHALLENGES

Oral health is an important aspect of general health and wellbeing and impacts of oral diseases are multiple, affecting both physical and psychological wellbeing and quality of life.5 Alongside general health, the impact of COVID-19 on oral health and oral health inequalities is significant as the steepest inequalities have been exacerbated within more vulnerable, disadvantaged and socially excluded groups, who already bear the greatest burden of oral disease.6 This situation is further compounded by limited provision of dental services throughout the pandemic.7-9

To deliver real change, a focus on the wider determinants of health is going to be necessary to achieve sustainable improvements in oral health.10 However, this will be challenging in light of the large-scale cuts to local authority public health grants over the years since the Health and Social Care Act was introduced in 2012.11

As we look to the future, it is fundamental that oral health improvement remains embedded across the health and social care system.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC PLANNING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Strategic planning is the process of developing an organisation’s purpose, aim and objectives. It includes the allocation of resources and responsibilities, drawing on robust evidence and setting feasible timescales for achieving goals.12 This article highlights tools and processes to support system partners in informing the development of their strategic plans so that they are able to adapt to the abolition of PHE and system re-configuration.

Documents such as the PHE Strategy 2020 to 202513 and the Faculty of Public Health 2020–202514 clearly set out the role, remit and strategic priorities of each respective organisation. What is required now, as we transition, is a scaled-down tangible process through which any
organisation can work through. Monitor
have proposed a seven-stage framework
as the basis of developing a strategy for
Foundation Trusts and other provider
organisations.12 These stages are also
relevant to strategic planning in public
health and are described next.

**FRAME**
This establishes a transparent framework
for the development and implementation
of the strategy with input from internal
and external stakeholders and partners.
Strategic planning should be a continual
process to deal with changing priorities
and uncertainties.15

**DIAGNOSE**
This establishes challenges and
opportunities in the context of a local
health and social care system. It involves
an internal assessment of the
organisation’s current performance,
including quality, operational, financial
and workforce. Externally, this would
involve assessing how well it is
responding to the needs, challenges and
priorities of the populations and
organisations it serves.

**FORECAST**
This stage involves creating a clear view
of the future in which the organisation
might operate within. Scenario planning
is a highly relevant tool given the level of
uncertainty we are currently faced with
as it explores more experimental or
innovative opportunities.16

**GENERATE OPTIONS**
This involves developing, exploring and
evaluating strategic ideas and options for
change. It might consider alternative
strategic priorities to focus upon,
whether a current priority should be
de-prioritised or whether to collaborate
with other organisations to meet
partners’ needs better.

**PRIORITISE**
This involves choosing which
strategic initiatives to pursue and building
them into a coherent strategy. This
requires an understanding of
national public
health priorities and
drivers, the future
hosting-organisation’s role and remit and
balancing this against the needs of the
local population. The potential additionality
of the organisation will need to be
considered, that is, if it is well-placed (i.e.
has the resources, capacity and capability)
to make a significant contribution.

**DELIVER**
This involves creating and publicising
the implementation plan, and allocating
resources to achieve the strategy. This
requires setting out the activities,
milestones, measurements and key
performance indicators and being
clear about who will deliver what,
by when.

**EVAOLVE: HOW TO FUTURE-PROOF
THE STRATEGY?**
This stage is about monitoring the impact
of the strategy to ensure it continues to
be effective. Substantial changes in the
external environment, such as significant
restructuring in across the health and
social care sector, would trigger an
automatic review of part or all of the
strategy.

**NOW WHAT?**
Across business and health sectors,
evidence demonstrates how strong
strategic planning delivers significant
benefits for organisations, their
partners, their staff and the local
populations they serve. This is now
particularly important given the ongoing
transformation within
health and social
care. Dealing with
uncertainty is core to
strategy development
and thus a
reconsideration of our
strategic approach is perhaps now very
timely. For oral health, this might involve
facilitating the development of a more
integrated approach to primary care
dental services and oral health
improvement. We will all need to work
together to maintain the profile of oral
health, ensuring it is entered onto the
agenda in these new partnerships and
systems.

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**ORCID IDS**
Reena Patel https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7749-5991
Robert Witton https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6424-4376

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