



2009 WINNING CASE STUDY  
Best Public Sector and Best Operational Performance in the  
Public Sector  
Atos Consulting with NHS South Central

## Transforming patient care to end waiting and changing lives

A ground-breaking programme with the NHS has ended excessive waiting and helped thousands of patients get better care.

### Executive summary

Making a sustainable difference in the hectic and complex environment of the NHS is notoriously difficult.

Yet a team from Atos Consulting has helped NHS South Central meet a Government target early to reduce patient waiting times while making sustainable improvements to quality of care.

Joint teams of clinicians and consultants worked closely together to understand the patients' journey from diagnosis to treatment. They focused at a detailed level on patients' needs to improve working practices by applying the principles of lean thinking taken from industry.

This was the first time lean thinking has been applied across an entire Strategic Health Authority and across so many organisational boundaries. As a result waiting times have reduced by an average of 14 weeks, and 25 weeks in some cases.

All this was achieved not by increasing funding, but by making sustainable improvements to release capacity, sometimes by 25%.

Key to success was the powerful combination of the passion and experience of NHS staff with the expertise and momentum of the consultants to make and sustain real change.

At the start, many in the NHS doubted whether it would succeed and had other competing priorities. Atos Consulting successfully gained credibility with frontline staff and worked closely with them to embed innovative new practices.

The NHS believes that the programme has brought an end to excessive waiting times, transforming the way healthcare is delivered and improving

“Transforming Care was in many ways a step into the unknown. Its success is a testament to all involved and to Atos Consulting, who brought expertise, professionalism, dedication and flexibility to the task. This is not something that would have happened without Atos Consulting’s input.”

the lives of thousands of patients.

## **Problem/opportunity faced by client**

NHS South Central is one of ten Strategic Health Authorities in England serving around four million people across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

It comprises nine primary care trusts, nine acute trusts, three mental health trusts, one learning disability trust, one specialist trust and one ambulance trust.

In June 2004 the Government published its NHS Improvement Plan requiring that 'by 2008 no-one will wait longer than 18 weeks from GP referral to hospital treatment'.

As an early adopter of the NHS Improvement Plan, and without additional funding to make it happen, NHS South Central realised that what was needed was a transformation of the way it delivered patient services.

## **Brief project background**

To meet the 18-week target, NHS South Central established its Transforming Care programme to apply the principles of lean thinking to redesign patient pathways in order to deliver sustainable improvements in quality and productivity.

A pathway is a patient's journey from first seeing a doctor through diagnosis, treatment and onto recovery and is defined by clinical need (for example back pain or mental health). With its roots in industry, lean thinking puts a relentless focus on how best to deliver the services that customers most value, and had been trialled on a limited basis within the NHS.

In August 2007 NHS South Central chose Atos Consulting to help deliver the Transforming Care programme using its experience of applying lean thinking within healthcare settings.

## **Objectives**

NHS South Central asked Atos Consulting to work with its nine primary care trusts to deliver:

- an NHS South Central Academy – a repository of service improvement tools and techniques
- 27 redesigned patient pathways – three high-priority patient pathways in each community with high waiting times or particular challenges
- transfer of skills and knowledge to NHS staff – to deliver improvements over time
- a Knowledge Management Framework – networks of experts to support sustainability, plus an electronic tool to capture specific deliverables for sharing.

## **Major challenges**

As an early adopter, NHS South Central had to demonstrate significant progress by March 2008. Even for an organisation accustomed to change, this was an extremely ambitious plan.

Patient pathways had been discussed in policy terms since 2004, but were still a new concept for service delivery. And while the theoretical benefits of lean thinking were clear, applying it practically brought some daunting challenges.

- While the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement had recommended lean thinking,

implementation on such a large scale had never before been contemplated.

- Redefining each pathway meant asking up to 30 different managers and clinicians to collaborate. Engaging busy clinicians (GPs, consultants, physiotherapists, nurses and theatre staff) was particularly difficult. Many were sceptical about whether industrial practices (and consultants) could succeed in a clinical environment.
- While each pathway crosses many areas of the NHS, organisational structures made it difficult to find ownership for one pathway end to end. Competing priorities between organisations hampered cooperation.
- The scale and geography of the programme was huge. Coordinating 27 projects would be difficult – as was ensuring consistency. There was natural pressure to ‘go native’ and bend to the immediate needs of patients and clinicians in a particular healthcare setting.
- Other major NHS initiatives were underway simultaneously. Staff and managers were concerned about yet more change and extra work for already-stretched teams.

## Consulting activity

Atos Consulting appointed an engagement partner to oversee delivery, with a project director and small office at NHS South Central HQ, and teams based in each of the nine communities. The team flexed from four consultants to 32 at its peak.

Between August 2007 and April 2008 Atos Consulting worked closely with the NHS teams, providing expert knowledge in lean thinking, as well as the impetus to progress, and analysis and facilitation techniques.

For the first two weeks, the team designed an eight-step process to implement lean principles across each pathway.

While the NHS had previously run rapid improvement events to identify and implement improvements within a week, Atos Consulting recognised that the risk of this approach was that improvements would fade over time.

The team decided to use a systematic eight-step methodology that took 20 weeks. Steps 1-5 covered redesign. Steps 6-8 focused on implementing and sustaining the changes. While step 6 delivered quick wins, the emphasis in steps 7 and 8 was on building sustainability and embedding the changes in organisational structures, roles and processes to make them stick.

To ensure the approaches were sustainable Atos Consulting worked with a team of matched NHS resources. Staff were seconded for 20 weeks, trained by Atos Consulting in a classroom setting, then coached on the programme. Finding enough staff was an ongoing challenge which Atos Consulting met by constantly highlighting the risks, lobbying for resources and becoming even more flexible in resourcing.

Due to the scale of the task and the tight timescale, Atos Consulting brought in lean experts from Unipart Expert Practices. Atos Consulting seamlessly integrated these specialists into its project teams, helping them understand specific issues for implementing lean principles in healthcare.

The team applied the process to 27 pathways. NHS staff trained by Atos Consulting will redesign the remaining pathways.

## Success factors and challenges

### Credibility and consensus

Much of the challenge was in getting initial interest from busy and sceptical people, and then – once the improvements had been identified – finding the energy and resources to implement them rigorously.

This was about gaining credibility within the NHS, and building consensus across a diverse range of clinicians and managers who collectively could decide on improvements and then embed new practices.

- At the end of each phase there was an 'outbrief' to validate the work with everyone involved.
- The team developed a detailed blueprint of each pathway. This was the first time that NHS processes had been mapped out in this way.
- Historically, detailed evidence on pathway performance had not been available. Building a strong evidence base was particularly useful to clinicians, often confirming their intuition. This empirical view was important in convincing clinicians of the value of the work.

### Challenging the status quo

Much of Atos Consulting's time was spent helping frontline teams to balance patient need with resources, and reconfiguring pathways to reflect this balance.

Some lean principles came naturally, for example putting the patient at the centre of the process. Others were more counter-culture and meant constantly challenging the status quo. For example:

- increasing clinical resources at unsociable hours to meet patient need
- changing working arrangements for consultants who balance workloads with private practice
- creating space in clinicians' frenetic diaries to address problems in a more systematic way.

The team constantly refocused the redesign around patients. For example, pathways could have been configured to be even faster, but the team took account of social factors (such as giving patients time to prepare practically and emotionally for surgery).

### Extent to which objectives were met

Atos Consulting met all four objectives for Transforming Care.

#### *Tangible benefits*

- Waiting times have reduced across 24 different pathways and nine health communities.
- The average reduction is 14 weeks per pathway. In some pathways, there was a reduction of 25 weeks, representing a 50% cut.
- At Southampton Accident and Emergency Department 98% of patients are now treated within four hours.
- In Milton Keynes, waiting times for GP appointments have reduced. In one practice 100% of patients can now expect to consult with their GP the same or next day.

Additional benefits include:

- more time spent with patients (for example 900 hours of clinical time released on one pathway)
- fewer hospital visits needed by patients (for example 30% in Buckinghamshire)
- a 50% reduction in the numbers of [patients](#) failing to attend appointments. This resulted from [better-planned care](#) and reduces disruption to clinicians' schedules.

#### *Intangible benefits*

In this complex and fast-moving environment, staff feel positive about finding solutions to what were often frustrating and long-standing problems. They now have the skills and confidence to continue.

“Lean has given us the structure and impetus to make things happen!”

Physiotherapy manager

## Building NHS capability

NHS South Central put a strong emphasis on transferring skills to staff. Atos Consulting trained more than 200 employees to use lean techniques and transferred skills to more staff day to day.

“Atos have been excellent to work with and the PCT [primary care trust] staff in the project team have learnt a great deal.”

Director of Contracts

## Lessons learned

The team pooled its learning on both elective and unscheduled healthcare to gain a unique perspective.

While it was a bold step to work across whole patient pathways, Atos Consulting learned that each pathway itself exists within a complex and interconnected set of systems.

It is now helping the NHS to pioneer the application of lean thinking to whole healthcare systems.

## Client/consultant relationship

Throughout, Atos Consulting's engagement partner attended monthly meetings of the 27 chief executives within NHS South Central to ensure feedback at the most senior levels.

The team had to engage closely with ten chief executives as well as hundreds of staff. In the early stages, getting their buy-in demanded dedication and focus.

Success depended on Atos Consulting's willingness and ability to get involved in every aspect of service delivery, and at a very detailed level.

“Transforming Care was in many ways a step into the unknown. Its success is a testament to all involved and to Atos Consulting, who brought expertise, professionalism, dedication and flexibility to the task. This is not something that would have happened without their input.”

Steve Fairman, Head of Service Improvement, NHS South Central

“I have found the Lean approach to be the fastest way for an individual or team to move to a position of positive engagement in a process of change and get positive results.”

General Manager, Acute Medicine and Rehabilitation Care Services

“We feel [the project] has been very successful in many areas. The main is that it has involved all staff along the way and this has helped increase teamwork and ownership in the practice and team morale has improved.”  
GP Partner